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TOUGH GUY By NOEL LOOMIS

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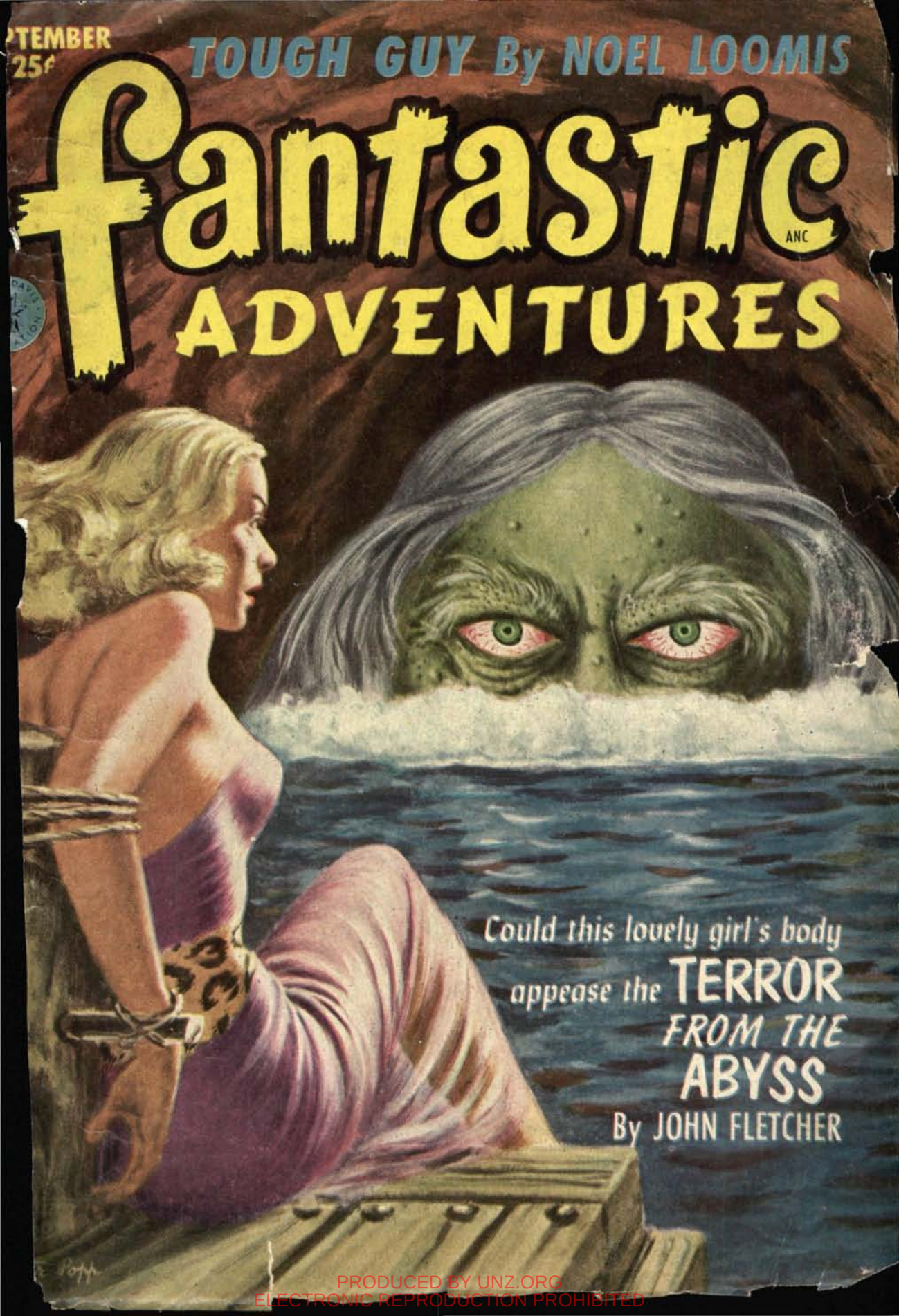

Could this lovely girl's body appease the TERROR FROM THE ABYSS

By JOHN FLETCHER

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# MEN BEHIND fantastic ADVENTURES

## John Fletcher

I WAS NEVER able to decide, when I was a boy, whether I was the baseball- or the book-beneath-the bough-type. Two things decided for me: a broken ankle sustained during a sand-lot game which our team lost, and a third prize in the 7B grade in the Bronx in an essay contest sponsored by the New York City Chamber of Commerce, who requested that I ask myself "What Are My Responsibilities as a Citizen in the Occupation Which I May Choose?" (On an apple-polishing impulse, I had said that I wished to be a writer; the action of the C of C confirmed the wisdom of the impulse and, as was to be expected, encouraged the wish.) Convalescence coincided with the days of my triumph. My leg encased in an impressive cast, I read omnivorously and wrote reams of vile verse, half a dozen unlikely short

*(Continued on page 130)*

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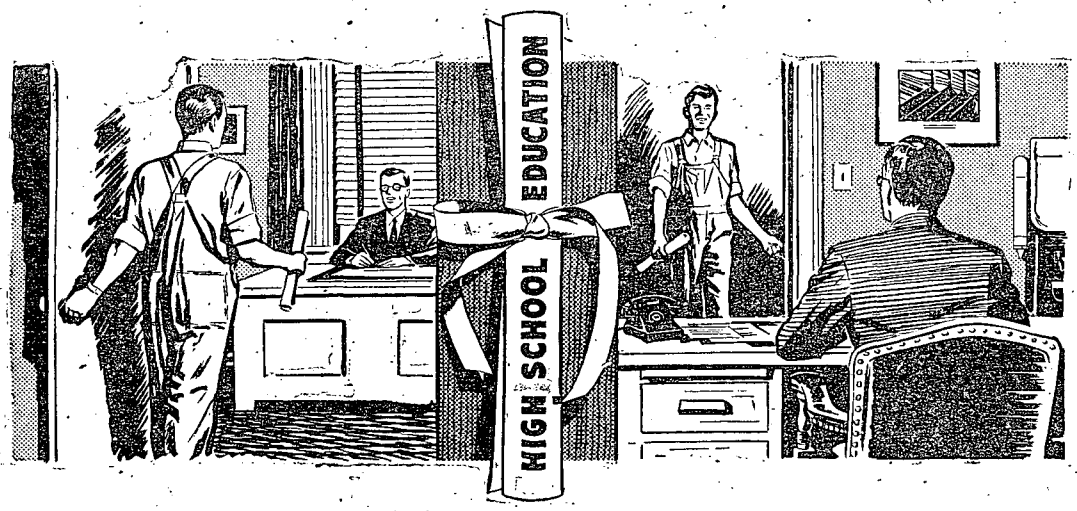


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FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is published monthly by the Ziff-Davis Publishing Company at 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Illinois. Entered as second-class matter July 30, 1937, at the Post Office, Chicago, Ill., under the act of March 3, 1879. Authorized by Post Office Department, Ottawa, Canada as second-class matter. Additional second class entry, Holyoke, Mass. **Postmaster—please return undelivered copies under form 5679 to 64 E. Lake St., Chicago 1, Ill. SUBSCRIPTION RATES:** U.S. Canada, South and Central America and U.S. Possessions, $2.50 for twelve issues; in British Empire, $3.50; all other foreign countries, $3.50 for twelve issues.



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SEPTEMBER, 1952

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EDITORIAL AND EXECUTIVE OFFICES, 366 MADISON AVE., NEW YORK 17, N. Y.

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE: All communications concerning subscriptions should be addressed to Circulation Dept., 64 E. Lake St., Chicago 1, Ill. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address.



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**VOLUME 14** **NUMBER 9**

# All Stories Complete

**TERROR FROM THE ABYSS** (Novel—23,000) ..... By John Fletcher ..... 8

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The line the monster could well have used was, "Darling, I love you so much I could eat you." And he wouldn't have been kidding

**TOUGH GUY** (Short—7,000) ..... By Noel Loomis ..... 46

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Something of interest is always happening in the political field. Take a hypodermic, a rabble-rouser, and a fanatic. Then watch the fun

Front Cover by Walter Popp, suggested by

a scene from "Terror From The Abyss"

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# The Editor's Notebook

## A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

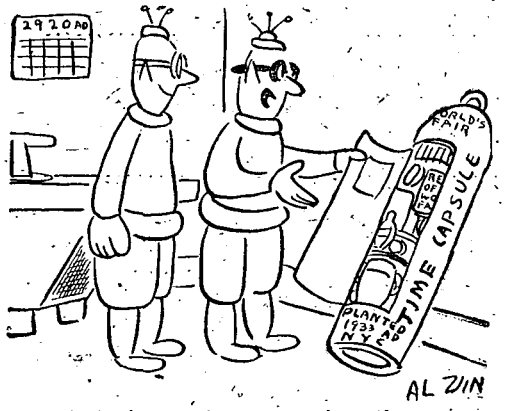
IT'S A HOT muggy day—and of all the things we'd like to be doing, writing an editorial is the least of them. But since we can't leave you readers holding a blank page 3....

IN SCIENCE fiction, the concept of time travel has always created a lot of pro and con debating. There's the group that staunchly backs such an idea, brings forth arguments which make it sound very plausible. While the other side listens earnestly, and pooh-poohs vigorously. And the fight is on.

PERSONALLY, we wish the idea of time travel could be true. If this concept should ever turn out to be a reality, you can be assured your editor will be the first to jump on the bandwagon.

IMAGINE: when Howard Browne looks over at us and sneers, "Hey, you loafing editor, where's that editorial for the September FA? It's two days late already! You'd better have it at the printer's by noon, or—!"

IF TIME were a continuous cycle, all we'd do would be to hop back a couple of days, write the editorial on time, and come home to a beaming boss who's delighted with our literary promptness. Or, what might be even more fun—we could hop ahead a couple of days and let the editorial worry about itself.




AL ZIN

"We don't know what it is, but if no one claims it in thirty days we'll dispose of it."

AS IT IS, we don't know exactly how to get on that cycle track. So we regretfully put aside the crossword puzzle on which we've been working surreptitiously all morning—put a blank piece of paper in the typewriter—study it with what we like to think is a profound thinker's expression. This is called "writing an editorial". Eventually, words do get on the paper, although we never can remember putting them there. But then, a good memory was never one of our strong points.

THE SAME can't be said for our readers. In an editorial several issues back (May FA) we promised a Larry Chandler lead novelette by August. We've since received letters riding us for the apparent omission of the Chandler opus.

BUT WE'VE never yet fallen down on a promise. We said August—we meant August. And in the October issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, which goes on sale during August, Larry has written one of the most provocative, hilarious, and exciting stories this magazine has ever published. "Is This The Way Home?" tells the story of a beautiful girl in another space continuum who, quite by accident, finds herself in our time and universe on the closet floor in a wealthy mansion. She winds up running first in a horse race, and marries the wealthy young heir of the mansion. If you haven't been a Chandler fan up to now, this story is guaranteed to make one of you.

NOTICE: watch page 3 of the October issues of the Ziff-Davis Fiction Group!

AND NOW—where did we put that crossword puzzle? .....LES



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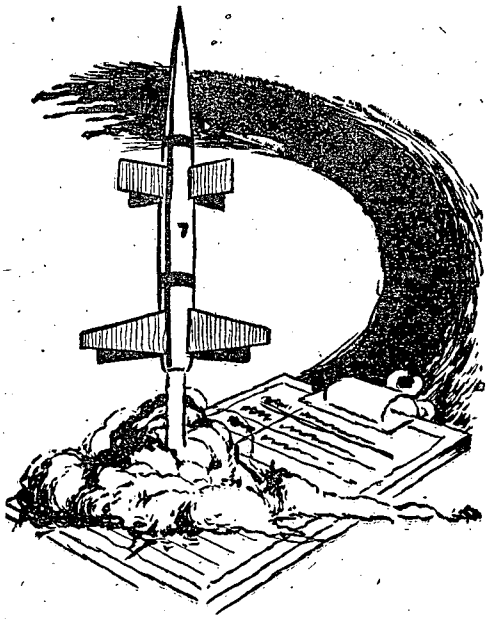
# D.E. — A MATHEMATICAL CUTIE

By

Geoffrey C. Martin



AS SOON as an experimental physicist performs an experiment, records his data and then starts thinking about them, the familiar bugaboo of mathematics rears its ugly (or lovely!) head. Invariably he runs into what is called a "differential equation", an impressive name for a rather simple idea. Differential equations are the keystones of theoretical and experimental physics. They constitute the essential mathematical part of physics, from the simplest ideas of motion to the most abstruse electrical and gravitic theory.

Differential equations are no different from ordinary algebraic equations—such as x plus y equals zero—with which everyone has struggled at one time or another through his school career, except that they contain what are known as "derivatives" or "rates of change". There is a difference, however, from ordinary algebraic equations; usually differential equations are rather difficult to solve by comparison and frequently they cannot be solved except on a trail-and-error basis, or by analog methods.

To understand the idea of differential equations, consider a rocket engineer starting from scratch with a rocket motor, measuring its fuel consumption, thrust, ejection velocity, etc. When he does this, tabulates the data, and begins fitting his facts into familiar equations, he discovers that what he erects, essentially, is a differential equation which says: "If the mass at any instant of the rocket is m, the exhaust velocity c, and the rate of mass flow dm/dt, then the thrust exerted is cdm/dt, and the equation is m times the acceleration equals minus cdm/dt." That sounds complicated. Actually it is not. It is simple and easy. It fits a familiar pattern of equations whose solutions have already been worked out, and it is a perfect expression for exactly what is happening in a rocket. With it, the rocket engineer can do a lot of things, especially since the equation tells him exactly what to change to modify the experimental motor.

This technique extends to every kind of experiment. In rocketry it is imperative. Recently there appeared a book by a rocket engineer in which all the mathematical work of rocketry has been neatly analyzed and tabulated so that it becomes almost a handbook type of thing involving a minimum of thinking.

A beginner in science, particularly if he is interested in rocketry, is often repelled by this sort of cold mathematical analysis. As a matter of fact, when Hermann Oberth's famous and fundamental book, *The Rocket in Planetary Space*, appeared about twenty-five years ago, it was received with something less than enthusiasm, since it started with formulae, used formulae throughout, and ended with them. As a consequence it made a very small splash in the world of rocketry, save only with those scientists and engineers who were mathematically trained. Yet what that book said is as true today as then and in fact incorporates the core and essence of all basic rocketry once and for all.

The differential equation has been a useful thing in science. Its utility, however, is only a starter. As science grows more complex and rocketry becomes more technical, the differential equations will appear with more frequency. They are the things which describe the way nature works. For anyone who wants more understanding of how physical things operate, including rockets, a knowledge of differential equations is an absolute necessity. Without mathematics you cannot hope to understand science. This is a truism which brooks no denial. Trying to learn science without mathematics is like trying to describe the sky from the bottom of a pool of muddy, murky water! Check your differential—equations!



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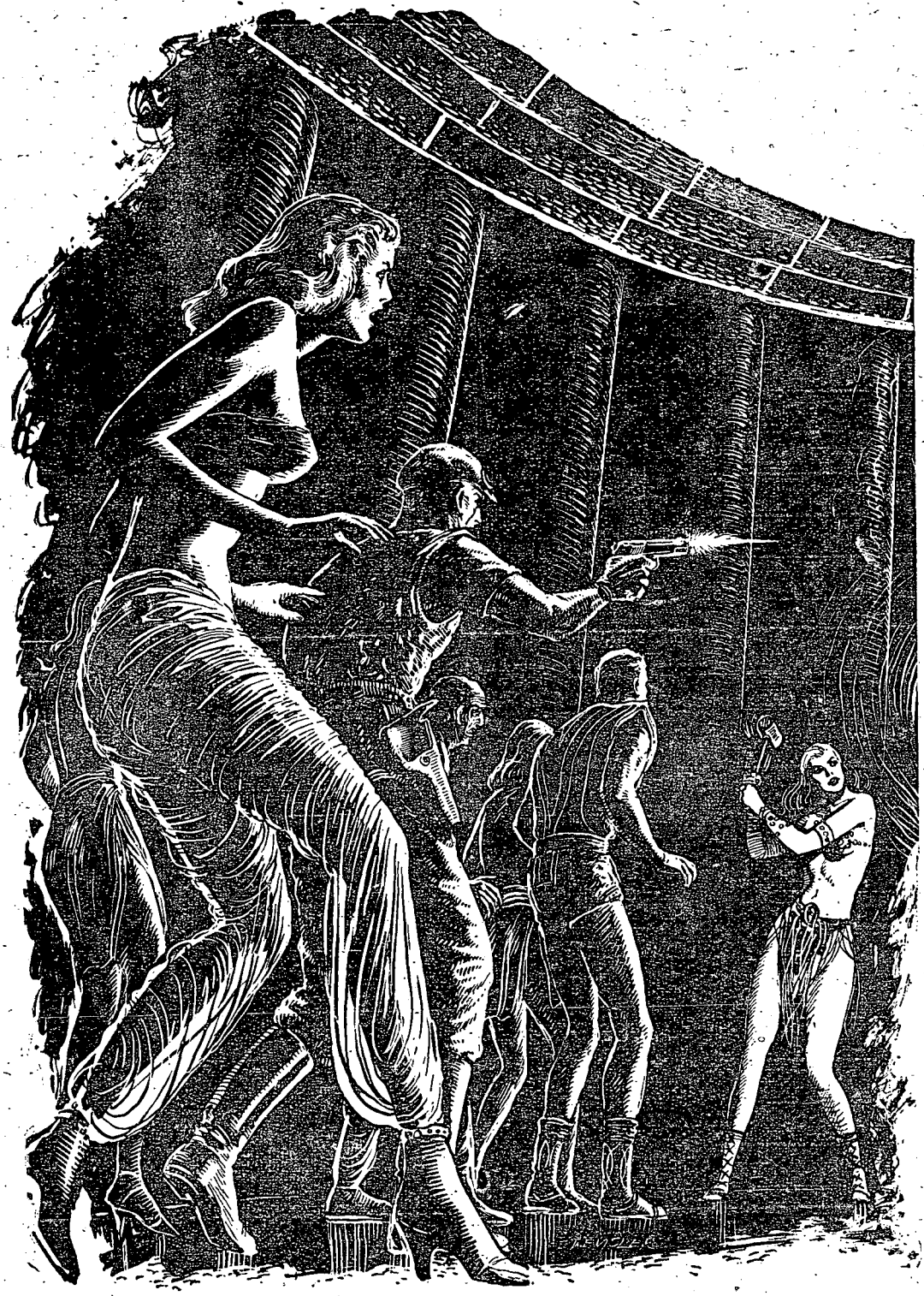

As the gong sounded, the hand of Fimbul appeared



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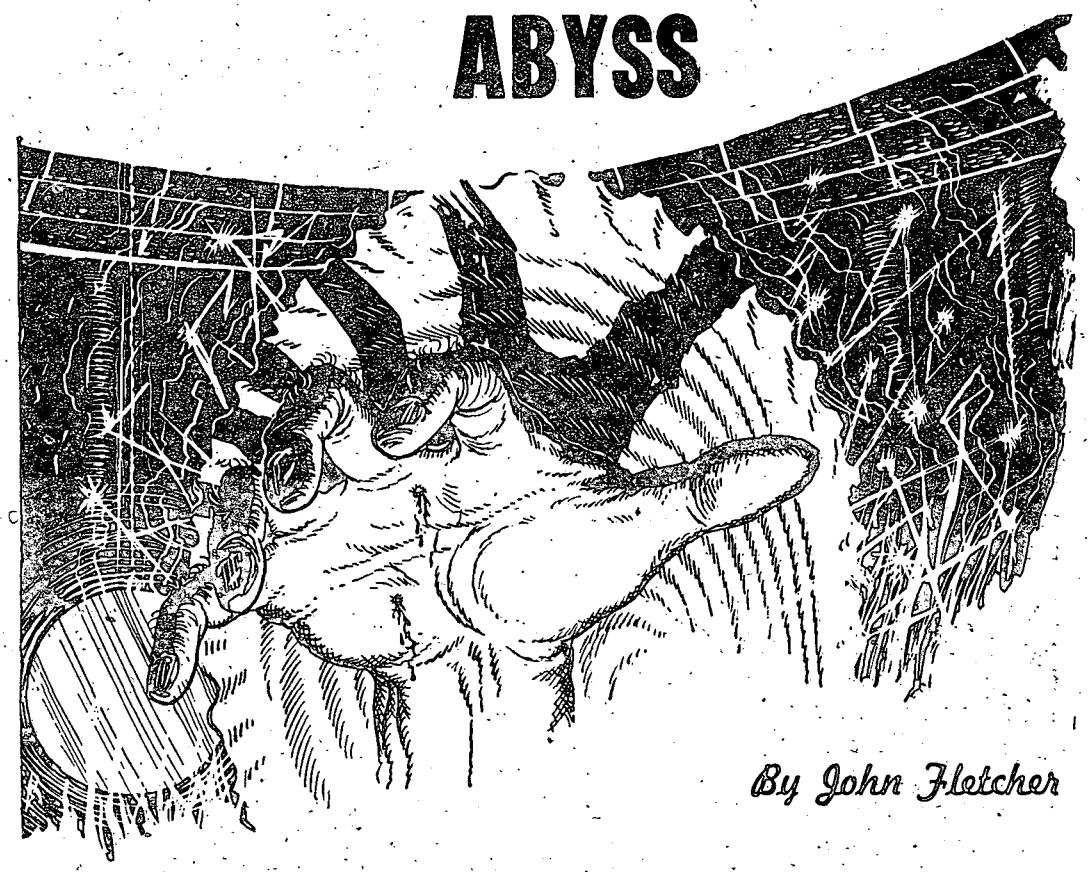
# TERROR FROM THE ABYSS



By John Fletcher

**They left Earth by the thousands and never returned. Such was the lure of Nibisia, Siren Planet. But Ring Lancaster turned his back on Nibisia. Was it from strength, or weakness?**

OF ALL THE thousands who had left Earth in the first attempts to bridge the void to the stars, Ring Lancaster was the only one on his way back. The ship he was piloting was one of the last group of three sent out by the united efforts of the nations of Earth. He was alone, and he chuckled as he thought of that fact. The other twenty-nine men of the three ships had utterly refused to accompany him on his voyage of return, for they wanted no part of Earth—not ever again. They had seen beautiful Nibisia, and they would not leave.

Lancaster, however, had not found everything to his liking on the weirdly lovely planet. He had ideas, and the biggest idea in his mind was how



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utterly perfect Nibisia could be with a change in rule. The mysterious Fimbul, whom the lazy Nibisians allowed to dictate their every law and custom and activity, had been ruling too long; much too long for an Earthman to think about. No Nibisian could conceive of a time when Fimbul had not lived. Ring knew he could do nothing about Fimbul himself—and therein lay the reason for his return trip.

In reality he had two reasons: one, to enlist the aid of the "Independents", who called themselves "The Independent Salvage Company, Inc."; the other to convince Ian Macaire, Director of the Bureau of Colonization under the auspices of the United Governments of Earth, that further space travel to Nibisia was futile.

AFTER THE despatching of the last three space ships and their thirty men, the Bureau and its backers sat back to wait for some sign that all their work and thousands of lives had not been spent uselessly in an impossible attempt. It was a year of suspense for everyone. Would any of the last three return? If they did not return, would the UGE abandon utterly any further attempts to reach other worlds? Would the people of Earth relax into the attitude that interstellar space travel was still impossible?

Ian Macaire, who had accepted the position of Director of the Bureau with misgivings, sat in his study on this night in June, 1993, sadly deciding that he had been inveigled into riding a dead horse. Instead of the growing power and prestige that would have been his if the ships had returned reporting habitable worlds ready and waiting for Earth's eager colonization, he had an already insecure tenure on a job with no conceivable reason for existence.

On his desk lay a folder containing astronomical and ballistical data, a compilation of scientific guesswork designed to guide the pilots of the last three space ships to their destination. Defeatedly, feeling his sixty-five years in every bone, Ian folded the data sheets, replaced them in the folder, tucked them back into the file cabinet against the wall. As he leaned back with a sigh, his debutante daughter, Erica, entered the darkened study, switched on the dome-light in the ceiling.

"It's gloomy as a tomb in here, Daddy! Why don't you quit worrying about the space ships and join the crowd in the rumpus room? You'll develop a neurosis or something!"

Macaire's voice was weary, his face pale in the whiteness of the light.

"It's such a puzzle, Erica. There must be unforeseen and terrible obstacles waiting out there in space, or all those ships would not fail to return. After the assembly agreed to keep on sending ships in the hope that eventually some would succeed and return to report, all of us have felt like criminals. Keeping the failures secret from the people is wrong; but how else can we go on with the work? And man must reach space. Earth won't support our growing numbers. It's wrong to keep sending men into what must be almost certain death. The people would never allow it if they were to be told the whole story. It's a violation of the constitution of the UGE assembly." Macaire's eyes on his daughter's were tragic.

"It's worse than criminal, Father," she agreed. "But, as you say, if man is to conquer space we can't count the cost. It's too necessary to race survival. The ships have to go, and if they don't return all we can do is send more ships to new destinations and wait and hope. But you mustn't let all the waiting and worrying get you

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down now, Father."

The old man shook his pink-bald head. "The strain of waiting, month after month, year after year, is driving me mad. At first we were so certain! Each time the ships roared up we all knew in our hearts this time was *it*—this time they *would* return! But only silence—silence—*silence!*"

THERE WERE others waiting for one of the three ships to return. Out in mid-Pacific lay an old steel liner, once proud queen of the seas as a passenger ship, now reduced to the status of a work horse. She was the property of The Independent Salvage Company, Inc.

On board, in the once-luxurious lounge, sprawled a score of young men. Their antecedents were varied, and nearly all of them could have been placed in jail by one government or another—for desertion, for lack of credentials, for a hundred and one minor and major breaches of the numerous laws of the various nations who made up the now dominant body called UGE, United Governments of Earth. Earth had at last combined all her governments under the Assembly of the UGE, and had perhaps only multiplied the complexities of administration by centralization.

There were many groups who found the restrictions of the UGE edicts impossible. One of these was the Salvage men, who found their usual operations far less profitable under the new salvage laws. One result was the formation of the Independents, formed in rebellion against the UGE. They had set up their own simple government, cut themselves off from all contact with officialdom, operated under a kind of piratical system of free salvage and illegal commerce. They were not many, these men, but they formed a nucleus around which were slowly gathering all the resentments the UGE had managed to create with their blundering. It was these rebellious men's opinions that the UGE was under the thumb of certain great commercial houses who were trying to squeeze out all their smaller competitors with ruinous taxation and impossible restrictions.

When the attempts to reach the moon had started, the Independents had salvaged two fallen rockets from the Pacific, where they lay unknown and unnoticed. When the UGE had financed the attempt to reach the planets, the Independents had decided that if the UGE found anything of great value, it would be kept a secret, monopolized by the "Big Interests". So they had commissioned one of their number, a hardy youngster named Ring Lancaster, to get aboard as their observer and report everything that happened.

TONIGHT their leader, whose official title was Captain of the remodeled liner, was holding forth on the possibility of Lancaster's return in the near future.

"...and when he comes I'll lay you ten to one it'll mean we'll finish fitting our own hull and blast off for space ourselves. Our kind just doesn't fit on old Earth any more. The day of independence is long gone. The big corporations don't want real men—they have no use for initiative. What they want is yes-men. Look at Jack, there. If he shows a nose in any port in the country, it means prison. What did he do? Just poked a nose that happened to belong to an officer of the UGE special police! Any other nose wouldn't have meant a thing, but that particular nose means prison for assaulting an officer."

"It's funny," said one of the younger men. "The bigger governments get,

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the worse they get, as far as the individual is concerned. Used to be a guy could cross a border and retain his freedom in an unjust case like that. But no more. They got you now. With UGE special police privileges, you aren't safe anywhere from any rap they want to hang on you."

Outside the old steel ship a murmur of sound, at first almost unnoticeable, crept in to the group, growing louder with a steady insistence that at last seized upon their heedless eardrums until one of them bellowed: "Overhead, boys! It's a rocket landing outside!"

As they scrambled for the stairs to the deck outside, Captain Abbott looked at his friend Jerry Mantagna. "It can't be Ring—he would have had to steal the ship, abandon the crew somewhere. He wouldn't maroon a bunch of the UGE boys just to bring us hot news. Or would he? He might at that, if the news was hot enough!"

The two men stood up, eyes aflame with the possibilities that roar outside was opening before their minds. Then they joined the scramble to be first upstairs.

Lining the rails, the hard-bitten salvage crew watched the flaming arc of the rocket overhead. Down, down, to falter suddenly as the tail dropped, to stand on end in a new burst of fire, then drop with a hiss and a splash not half a mile away.

Men piled pell-mell into the lifeboats, letting down their own davits from the boat itself. They rowed across the heavy swell recklessly, sixty men in three boats in a race to be first to the first rocket ever to return from space.

REFRESHED, and out of his UGE Space Pioneer's uniform, Ring Lancaster stood beside the big table in the old ship's lounge, facing the men of Independent Salvage, Inc.

"The first thing I want you to know is the tremendous sacrifice I have made in tearing myself away to bring you this message. Those others will never return to Earth, but not because I abandoned them. They have the other two ships intact. There is no obstacle to their return. They will not return because they are living a life so wonderful they can't bear to leave it, on the chance they might not be allowed to return again—a very good chance, as you know, who have had experience with the vagaries of the UGE.

"Earth is a sterile, worn-out world of foolishness and dullness. The other worlds we touched are wild and young and free. Only the love I have for you, a genuine friendship and admiration for the qualities you fellows possess, that other Earthmen do not have—only *that* brought me back here.

"I want you men to appreciate that I gave up a chance at a near-immortal life, a near-immortal wife, a grand and glorious life—just to be a friend. The other worlds I saw—by comparison, Earth isn't a world. It's a dead hole of dullness, dominated by idiots."

"Sounds good," grinned Abbott over a beer stein. "But now what do we do?"

"I'll tell you! And when I've told you, I'm leaving. I've got one more errand tonight, and then I'm off again. No more Earth for me. I've found a real world!"

"Aw, Ring," several men chorused, but Jerry Mantagna put their thoughts into words. "Maybe we can't find our way without you! Maybe you'd better stay here and pilot our ship to the right place! What do we know about space navigation? We put good dough into sending you to the UGE pioneer training school, bribing officials, getting you appointed, buying uniforms,

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fixing everything. Now you want to walk out with only words! We're only salvage men, Ring. How can we navigate space? Where do we find a man who's been to space when you're the only one on Earth?"

"I sent you the books and data from school, Abbott! Didn't you study them?" asked Ring, eyeing his friend and leader.

"Sure, boy. We studied them and we *can* do the job. But we don't understand why you have to rush off."

Ring leaned over, giving them a stare of strange intensity. "I've got to get back quick because things change fast there! I don't want to lose my grip on something *big*. Something big that you men will share in—if I can save it for you. I can't wait while you finish your ship—but I'll be there to welcome you when you come. I'll need you then, and you'll understand, when you see, why I had to hurry. I've got star maps here. I'll leave you all the necessary data. You can't miss, if you follow directions. But step on it. Things out there don't stand still like they do here. And I'll need you when I've finished laying the groundwork."

"What's this mysterious something?" asked Abbott.

For a moment there was silence in the lounge. Then Ring Lancaster reached out, put his hand on Abbott's stein on the table. He pushed gently down, and as the astounded men watched, it sank slowly through the wood until it disappeared. Then there was a loud crash as it smashed to bits on the floor beneath the table. Several of the men cursed.

"Matter will be putty in your hands!" breathed Lancaster in a whisper that carried like a shout in the ensuing silence. "You'll be *men,* as men are supposed to be! You'll be *alive*—not dead! *If I can get back in time!*"

"Get going!" breathed Abbott. "We'll be there, Johnny on the spot, when you need us. Just give us that data. . . ."

RING LANCASTER set the spaceship down in the river, let it sink until water lapped about the top exit lock. The roar of the rockets echoed from the cliffs, but he felt sure the roar would be taken for thunder. It was raining hard. He drove the ship along the quiet current until it nuzzled against a deserted dock. It would be unnoticed here, provided he got back by daylight. This was a submarine storage area, and the spaceship looked enough like a submarine to go unnoticed even if seen.

Ring strapped on belt and holster, checked the heavy automatic, clambered out the lock and onto the boards of the deserted dock. Luckily, the Director's mansion was close to the river. He could make it unobserved along the dark streets if he kept out of the light. It wouldn't do to get picked up by the UGE special police now when he had everything set.

Ring chuckled as he thought how very many of the UGE agents and special police would be seeking him if they knew he was on Earth. The ship he had concealed in the shadows of the submarine dock was the *only* space ship ever to return to Earth from beyond the moon's orbit.

It was pitiful, he mused, that Earth was so uninviting a place that no creature aware of life as it should be would ever visit it of its own free will. His nostrils wrinkled against the unpleasant taint of the stale and stinking air. No, he himself would certainly leave Earth again this very night!

But there was the matter of the letter. He touched the sealed parchment in the breast of his leather tunic, and chuckled again. Fimbul thought that

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letter would make sense to old Macaire of the Bureau! Ring Lancaster knew better.

When he reached Ian Macaire's mansion, he walked through the door without opening it. He found the Director in his study....

IAN MACAIRE, aging Director of the Bureau of Colonization, looked down at the letter the disreputable character had handed him. He wondered how this man had gotten through the guards and secretaries who protected the privacy of the United Government's officials. He glanced somewhat disapprovingly at the worn and torn clothes, at the leather jerkin that was unfamiliar. Then he jerked erect, his eyes on the uniform cap bearing the familiar emblem. His body quivered with the shock of realization. The emblem was that worn by the men he had sent out into space and never heard from again!

"You've returned!" he croaked. "Why has nobody told me? Speak, man! Was the venture a success or a failure?"

The man from space shook his head, his eyes seeming to pity Macaire, his expression rather that of a nurse considering a very sick patient. "Read this letter, Mr. Macaire. I brought it to you at considerable effort, for no reason but consideration for your position. There will be no others returning. I am alone. Read."

Macaire stared at the man, noting a very strange, distant attitude, a kind of withdrawal.

Macaire opened the plain brown envelope, drew out a folded parchment delicately inscribed in a vivid purple ink. He read.

Erica Macaire, clad now in a mere froth of hot weather clothing, a kind of Turkish pantaloon wrought out of sheer gauze, a wisp of silk tied about her proud young breasts, chose this moment to enter the study again. She hoped to coax her father out of his gloomy mood and take his mind off the failure of the space attempts.

AS SHE entered, she did not notice the dark figure in the shadows just beyond her father's desk light. She crossed and bent over his shoulder, intrigued by the odd appearance of the yellow parchment, decorated with arabesques of purple ink. Suddenly she realized her father was not alone. She crossed the room and switched on the dome-light, intending to make the visitor comfortable with a chair, and perhaps a drink. But the oddly belligerent expression on the handsome young man's face deterred her, and she found she could not bring herself to speak to him. She moved back and stood defensively at her father's shoulder, sensing the conflict that charged the air between them. As the parchment fell from her father's fingers, she picked it up and began to read it aloud, glancing curiously at the pilot as she found the words made little sense to her.

*You men of Earth have never seen the Temple of Nibis, where the gigantic water-gods peer forever from the Lake of the Dead. You have never felt the terror of the Hand of the Overlord, reaching for his chosen. I, the Overlord of Nibisia, tell you —do not come to Nibisia. Your warriors are safe and alive and happy, but they will never return to you. Fimbul does not want the people of Earth to come to his happy world.*

*FIMBUL*

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"What does it mean?" asked Erica, in a voice that was eerie with a realization of the alien mind behind the writing.

The stranger, in his worn clothes, neither smiled nor looked at her. He said, "Read it all."

*P.S. This postscript added without Fimbul's knowledge. Ring Lancaster insists on returning against our advice. We remain here of our own will, because if we return to Earth we fear we may not get a chance to come back to Nibisia. Fimbul, the Overlord, is a mystery. We have not seen him. Few ever do, we understand. If he says he doesn't want more Earth people, it may mean something and it may not. We, who seem to you to be mutineers and deserters, can only excuse ourselves by explaining that this world is too wonderful to leave. We do want to go on record as endorsing Earth's attempt to reach the planets of other stars, for Earth is not fit for life. Once you had seen a planet like Nibisia, you would agree. But we prefer that you do not see Nibisia.*

*Signing for all the crew of the three ships, FIRE-DRAKE, STARSEEKER and MAGELLAN, I remain your disobedient servant,*

*Capt. Emory Lane,*
*of the UGE Starship FIRE-DRAKE.*

Erica threw the strange letter to the desk, her eyes flashing at Lancaster with anger and disbelief. "This is ridiculous! You must be an imposter seeking to gain the fame of the men who have gone to their death! You should be arrested!"

The man said nothing, only standing there woodenly, his hand beside the gun in his holster crooking slightly. His eyes on Erica's gave her a shiver of apprehension. They were distant eyes, cold and glowing with a strange energy.

Erica went on: "The year of building, our waiting space fleet, the years spent in training and equipping the Pioneers, all to be wasted utterly. Someone is mad! I believe *you* are mad!"

THE MAN from space spoke then, but his voice was strange as a wind over an ice field, cold and distant and disgusted—and the Director's hand groped for the letter, his eyes on the spaceman fearful and expectant of things he did not want to hear.

"Mr. Macaire, I know the private interests who rule the UGE assembly, and who control you and your Bureau. So don't give me any speeches on the unfaithfulness of these so-called deserters. They know, too, and don't consider it dishonorable to be unfaithful to the dishonored.

"We pioneered, did the tough work with fear in our hearts, and we won a reward of ecstasy, new youth and strength, a new and better life. We intend to keep it. But we have sent back word to you hoping that for once you will be honorable and tell the people the whole truth.

"In my heart I know better; I know you will do otherwise. I know what you will try to do, even before the act has occurred to your mind. Nibisia has a way of sharpening the perceptions. And, since we don't want a horde of merchants cluttering up the love and peace and beauty of Nibisia

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with their development of useless wares and degrading, besotting products, we are taking this action. It would be a repetition of the history of our own Indians all over again. Let us hope Nibisia can be spared the 'firewater treatment'. I don't intend to give you the correct data for finding the planet.

"I realize there is no way to make you understand what has happened to the men who landed on Nibisia. No way to show your blind commercial eyes the poetry that life is on that planet. I can only say there is no return for us to the corruptness of Earth. As for you, seek out the far worlds and choose that one which pleases you. But stay away from Nibisia."

Whatever else he might have wanted to say, they were never to know. He halted; his eyes lost interest in them. "I know you can't understand. But they still had a loyalty to you. They can't fully realize how bad it is on Earth." The man's eyes were very strange now, glowing and preoccupied with some thought that considered them not at all.

Erica gave a snort of scorn. "It's but a year since your ships lifted from Earth. And you speak as if mankind were vile dust beneath your feet! You . . . *jake!*"

His eyes turned to Erica's, wild with some vital thing that felt itself chained here in this room. A little thrill of fear and of something deeper, something anticipating ecstasy, something longing, chased itself up Erica's spine.

"I can show you," said the man. "I can't tell you, but I can show you. Get me a fishbowl and some wax."

Macaire came out of his bewildered state, sputtering in confusion. "Er . . . I'll get them, Mr Lancaster. I'll certainly bring you that bowl and the wax. If anything can explain why my Pioneers should utterly desert, become completely irresponsible, I'd certainly like to know what it is."

As the old man bustled ponderously from the room, Ring Lancaster's sharp, low voice followed him. "Dereliction of duty, Mr. Macaire, should be no mystery to you. There are many reasons to cause it, such as gold."

THE DIRECTOR winced visibly, his step faltered. He was just outside the door when Lancaster moved like a ripple of jet-gas, seized his arm as he reached for the hidden bell-pull.

"Oh no, Right Honorable Mr. Macaire, not that way!"

With a powerful thrust he sent the ponderously fat man back into the room to the desk, where he wound up with a thud against the heavy piece of furniture. "Always honest, eh? Sit down— I'll show you anyway. Perhaps your daughter can understand."

Lancaster picked up a hemisphere of crystal in which lay a dozen roses and tossed the dripping stems to the carpet. The water he poured into a smaller bowl of metal, an ashtray. He put the metal bowl on the center of the desk and dumped into the water a double handful of black soil taken from a houseplant. Erica and the old Director stood beside the desk, their faces expressing the conviction that they were dealing with a maniac.

Ring took a little vial from a pocket of his leather tunic and poured three drops of a milky fluid into the ashtray. Then he carefully corked the vial and replaced it in his pocket. Finally he inverted the crystal bowl over the soil and water, stood back.

"In about twenty minutes you will see something inside that bowl that should convince you that Earth is

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really a sterile planet and no fit place for true life to develop. None of the real worlds of space will ever tolerate Earth's peoples in their futile life pattern. The whole imperialistic dream of the UGE financiers is utterly impractical; the wealth of far worlds will never pour back to Earth. The men who left Earth do not return because oaths of allegiance and sense of duty to such things as you and the corrupt UGE become dissolved in an inrush of mental and physical change. There can be no stupid acceptance of Earth life as a normal way of life—all your pioneers will always say good-bye to Earth, just as we have."

Erica, more and more intrigued by the vital and handsome appearance of the spaceman, picked up the letter from the desk to hide the fact that her eyes were devouring the man. "This pictograph looks familiar. Is it just a decoration, a kind of illumination?"

Lancaster nodded. "It is one used by the world's most ancient religion, the worship of Mother Mu. The figure is the mother, the lotus symbolizes her Land of the Blessed. The symbolism is all that remains of a time when Earth was truly a land of the blessed. It is not so today!"

Erica, realizing they were in this man's power, and that it would be better to trim her sails to the wind, tried a somewhat fluttering smile. He was really terribly handsome, in spite of his rags. She felt strong stirrings in her youthful body.

THE MAN flushed slightly, as if aware of her reaction to him. Seemingly embarrassed at her filmy clothing, or her attempt to be friendly, he stepped back from her as if she were apt to contaminate him. His action gave Erica confidence. She knew her men and, undaunted by his severe expression, moved closer, her young figure under the snug, gauzy trousers, and the knotted silk scarf, stimulating him against his will.

Ring turned his eyes away, flushing, but the anger faded from his face. Apparently to take his mind from her nearness, he said: "I didn't return for this errand specifically, but for another reason. I belong to an organization of honest and independent men. They sent me with the fleet as an agent to learn where the other ships had been sent, and what happened to them. We had suspicions that all had not been given to the newspapers. I returned for their sake."

Erica moved even closer, her face but inches from his, as anger again overcame her discretion. "So there is no loyalty at all in you for the UGE which has brought permanent peace to the world? Only loyalty to some company of freebooters, is that it?"

Lancaster recoiled angrily from her again. He took a stride toward the door. "I've no time for this! I brought you the letter. I knew you'd be unable to understand it. But if you watch that bit of life I've set growing on your desk, and use your powers of reasoning, you will understand why men will never return to Earth after seeing worlds like Nibisia."

He turned to leave. But in the doorway appeared the black and gold uniform of a UGE special police guard. He stood quietly, his hand holding an automatic centered on Lancaster's chest. Macaire looked from the police guard to the spaceman. "You'll not leave here till I give permission," he said quietly.

Ring smiled quietly, turned back, stood watching the old man and his daughter. They stood beside the momentarily forgotten bowl. Lancaster gestured toward it. "Better watch what goes on inside."

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Changes were occurring inside the glass globe. Green stirrings moved about the air within, and the black soil had become covered with a fine, green growth. The water unabsorbed by the soil had turned to a milky consistency, and surged and bubbled with some activity. As they bent over the desk, a green fantasy of growth shot upward from the center of the little mound of earth, spread out into a dozen tiny leaves. From beneath the plant a tiny winged something emerged, lifted upward in a lazy glide, began to swoop and soar in play. Over the surface of the soil now ran and leaped tiny figures, giving the illusion of minute people, though of course they must be some kind of insect. But were they? Macaire took a lens and bent closer, saw with its aid they were neither insect nor animal, but something he had never seen before.

AT THE end of a quarter hour of excited observation, these creatures had built tiny homes, erected tiny towers, swum in the milky water, created a miniature civilization.

"What were those drops you put into the bowl?" asked Erica, turning from the fascinating display of growth to the silent, waiting visitor.

He smiled, a little condescendingly, she thought—or was that pity she read on his face?

"Just water from the Sea of Life on Nibisia. Life is rapid and developing there, static and meaningless here."

Macaire turned to the guard who held the doorway, pistol in hand. "Take this man to a detention cell until we have decided what to do in this case," he ordered, and turned away. But Lancaster moved like a flash, a blur of impossibly rapid movement for a human being—and the guard lay senseless, his gun in Lancaster's hand.

"You still do not understand, Mr. Macaire! Now you'll have to go with me to assure my safety. I have no time to spend here on Earth. I came only to bring you an explanation, which you cannot grasp even though it is before your eyes. Come along, now, or I will relieve mankind of the burden of your stupidity."

Macaire, unbelieving, stood with his heavy face flushed with anger, facing the gun in the spaceman's hand. Erica gave a little cry of astonishment, belatedly realizing that the man before them was no longer to be classed with ordinary mankind. For no man could cross ten feet of space, knock down a strong guard, take his gun and return to his former position with nothing being visible but a blur.

Lancaster slipped the gun into his belt, his hand dropping with quiet emphasis to the worn grip of the weapon in his holster. His voice was without humor, a grim and deadly calm intonation. "I went out with that expedition as a spy, to learn the truth about our disappearing space ships. I learned enough, even before the expedition arrived at our destination, to know that the UGE is dominated by private interests who set their own welfare above the world's. I know, Macaire!"

The director slumped wearily, turned and made his way to his chair behind his desk. Once seated he seemed to draw strength from his position and gestured boldly. "Get out, then! I'm not discussing UGE business with an admitted spy."

Instead of leaving, Lancaster laughed shortly, scornfully. "You do not grasp the situation, my dear Director. You are in no position to dictate to me. This is not the high seat of the Assembly. I hold the cards, and if I wish to discuss certain things

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you will comply with my wishes, or else. . . ."

ERICA, HER fears vanishing in a wave of strange emotions that flooded her whole body to the exclusion of all else, leaned against her father's polished desk top with her hand at her throat to control the impulses the nearness of this superman forced upon her. Beside her the little fishbowl world went on evolving, producing miracle upon miracle of swift development all unnoticed. "Or else what?" asked Erica, a strange look on her face.

He turned to her, a faint flush running swiftly over his stubbled cheeks. "Or else I will be forced to do something I'd regret. As I was saying, my employers sent me to learn if there were a genuine mystery behind the failure of our ships to return. Or if perhaps there were some great discovery made and concealed for reasons we could only guess. I have come to you now only to make sure you really understand the mystery yourselves; for which service you have tried to arrest me."

The girl turned as if to leave, but the stranger barred her path past the unconscious guard with one incredibly quick move. Her body pressed against his momentarily. Then she stepped back, gasping, not entirely from anger.

"Who are you anyway? What makes you think you can get away with this sort of thing?"

"I might ask your father how he expects to get away with denying the people the truth about the lost expeditions. Who does he think he is, to send a thousand men into space without adequate report of their doings; without even satisfying anyone whether they are to be expected back or to be regarded as dead? But I'm not here for that! I want certain information only he can give me. I want the plans of those expeditions, their destinations, their numbers, the weaponing of the ships—everything."

"Why?" asked Macaire, his pink face too innocent and bland.

"When the UGE prohibited the private building of space ships, the people I represent rebelled. My group has operated for many years without benefit of official supervision or interference. My profession is salvage, my training was thorough. I am perhaps one of the most efficient practical engineers who ever hauled a boat from Davy Jones's locker. We have never had much respect for the UGE's rather stupid repressions, and your move against unofficial space travel was the capper. We built such a ship. But we knew as little about space as you do, and we have no expendables to send to their deaths. Suffice it to say that I insinuated myself into your Pioneer Space Corps and accompanied the Third Expedition. I know where your Pioneers have gone, that group anyway. I want to know where the others have gone. Now get those files out, Macaire, or must I toss the whole mess on the floor as I search myself?"

Erica shouted in anger: "I know what you are now! You're the world's first space pirate, here to get the rest of our ships and weapons!"

A grim look passed over the man's face. He shook his head as he watched her father fumble among the file cabinets. "I'm not a pirate, girl. I'm just a man who knows what has to be done, and that he's the only man on the spot able to do it. We're not pirates, we're people who prefer to order our own lives in our own way. You will both leave now with me, to escort me back to my ship."

The Director came back from his battery of files and tossed four folders onto the desk. "There's all the data

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you need to follow their trails. Since I know you won't return, there's no need to worry about the antagonisms between your own people and the UGE. I have long recognized the existence of powerful groups who do not recognize UGE's sovereignty. I even admit their right to remain aloof. I'll take no action against them, and see no need to even mention your visit."

Lancaster picked up the folders, riffled through them an instant, then removed the contents. They were light copy paper. He wadded them up and thrust them inside his leather vest, zipping the pocket shut.

"You talk sense, Macaire, but I have no way of knowing you'll act as you say you will."

"Perhaps I can prove it to you," said Macaire softly. "Erica, get something on. We'll drive our guest to his destination. If we do nothing to hinder his departure, he must certainly believe what I say."

"Not certainly," said Lancaster, "but it'll help. I don't want to hurt you or your daughter."

SOME MINUTES later they were whirling along through the city traffic in an official limousine, Erica on one side of Lancaster and the Director on the other. A uniformed chauffeur drove, and from time to time Lancaster gave brief directions through the speaking tube.

Ring Lancaster had not accepted the Director's change of attitude. He glanced over his shoulder continually to see if they were being followed, but in the maze of glowing headlights there was no way of knowing for sure. So he misdirected the driver along the avenues leading out of the city and into a freight thoroughfare deserted at this time of night.

"We aren't being followed, if that's your purpose in these maneuvers," said Macaire matter-of-factly.

As he spoke, two pairs of headlights turned into the deserted road behind them and dogged their every turn. Lancaster glared at the Director, decided his discomfiture was well feigned, if not genuine. But Erica sat stiffly beside him, looking straight ahead primly. A grim iciness descended on Ring. Her attitude was not as good as her father's, who was obviously a better actor. She gave their insincerity away. Well, they'd learn about Ring Lancaster this night, if they made even one move toward that hidden craft. Didn't they know that there were only two alternatives, considering the information he'd given them about his organization of Independents—and that he wasn't the kind to kill a woman?

Knowing that with Macaire's chauffeur driving there was no way to shake off the pursuit, and since it would make no difference anyway now that Macaire and his daughter had convinced him of their duplicity, he directed the driver immediately to the point where he had left his ship.

The limousine drew up beside the long, low shape in the water. Lancaster did not delay, but drew his gun from his holster. "Get aboard immediately. Your agents will arrive directly and I do not wish to kill them. Please, I am very nervous...." But his steady hand on the gun gave the lie to his last words.

The chauffeur, seeing that his employer was threatened, and knowing nothing else of the affair, left his feet in a long dive at Lancaster. But the barrel of the weapon crashed down upon his skull, and he slid along the ground—lay groaning, half unconscious, at their feet.

"Get aboard, quick now!" ordered Lancaster, and Macaire complied out of respect for his own pate. Erica was already in the lock, waiting calmly—too calmly, Lancaster thought.

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Lancaster dogged the air lock shut behind them. He ordered them forward, then strapped them into acceleration bunks. Macaire was protesting vigorously but Erica remained silent, an enigmatic ghost of a smile on her lips. She lay quietly while he jerked the straps tight around her soft body. He flushed and placed himself in the pilot's seat.

THE SHIP moved quietly out upon the dark surface of the river and was almost instantly lost in the mist. Behind them, on the deserted dock, the headlights of the pursuing cars came to a bewildered halt. Lancaster grinned. Not even the chauffeur would be able to convince them that a spaceship had been moored there.

The ship picked up speed rapidly, was soon riding its high bow wave down river at seventy miles per hour. Then when it was miles at sea, she lifted skyward out of the water, her rockets a plume of flame behind her, and a roar like thunder shaking the air. As far as Earth people were concerned, no man had ever returned from space. As for the guard in Macaire's study, he would have no idea of Lancaster's identity—he had heard no reference to it, and even if he recognized the emblem on Ring's cap, he could not connect it to a returned Pioneer.

Over his shoulder Lancaster bellowed at Macaire. "We're heading out, Macaire. You should have played fair, then you'd have remained on Earth in stolid comfort. It never pays to double-cross."

But Macaire had nothing to say—for with the first rush of acceleration he had lapsed into unconsciousness. His daughter said calmly: "It wasn't his fault. I ordered those men out because I didn't trust you. They were only a guard, set to watch us, to get help if you tried to abduct us."

"That was stupid," blazed Lancaster. "You did the only thing necessary to make sure I'd have to abduct you—or kill you!"

But Erica seemed no longer to be paying attention to him. Instead she was staring at the blazing firmament ahead, her head spinning with the pressure of acceleration. Her lips moved, and she repeated softly: "You of Earth have never seen the Temple of Nibis, where the giant water gods peer..." Aloud she said: "But *I* will!"

"What?" said Lancaster, puzzled.

She smiled at him and let her eyes rove over his body. He flushed and turned to his controls.

EARTH WAS a dwindling point in a firmament of blazing diamonds far behind. Their destination was a similar point, far ahead, indistinguishable from a billion other points, when Macaire again became conscious. Lancaster had released the straps that held him in his bunk. Erica was already out of hers, seated before the large port, staring out in fascination at the beauty of space.

Macaire got to his feet cumbrously, his usual two-hundred-fifty pounds of flesh unaccountably light and unmanageable. After the first sensation of giddiness had gone, he found himself able to get about much more easily than ever before in his memory. But now he managed to crack his head on a ceiling girder as he left the floor in his first step.

"You'll get used to it shortly," Lancaster assured him as he rescued him, steadied him. But the aging Director swore.

Erica proved a charming hostess as well as an excellent cook. The first meal went off rather pleasantly, marred only by one outburst by Macaire. "You'll rot in jail when we return!"

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Ring answered him. "After all, you forced this on me."

Erica bent her eyes upon her plate demurely and her father glared at her suspiciously. "I never ordered any operatives out after us, Lancaster!"

"I know," murmured Ring, his eyes on Erica too. "But it seems your daughter was not as honorable as I expected her to be. I don't know how she did it, but she managed it. I—"

"I left a note." Erica was quite calm, her eyes sparkling. "I wrote it when I dressed. I dropped it in the doorway where the guard couldn't fail to see me drop it. You were intent on Father passing us through, and didn't notice. I couldn't speak out to him, but he is an intelligent man and was sensible enough to do it my way."

Ring studied her. "You knew I'd have to take you along when you did that. Is that what you wanted?"

She nodded. "That's what I hoped, Lt. Lancaster. I wanted to see space, and it seemed the only chance I'd ever get. It worked out beautifully."

Macaire stared at his daughter, then suddenly he laughed. "Erica, you don't realize what you've done. But now that it's happened, I feel a sort of relief, a sense of escape. Ring here was hitting closer to the mark than he realized back in my study."

"I knew a change would do you good!" she said with a sprightly gesture. "You've been worrying about your Pioneers for months."

Lancaster stared at Macaire a moment, then he looked back at Erica. "You call this a 'change'?" he asked. "You don't realize what a change! Nibisia isn't going to be the picnic you expect."

"But I thought you said Nibisia was such a paradise that once a man got there he'd never leave?" she asked.

"It is," he said. "But I haven't told you everything."

Macaire looked at him. "Fimbul?" he queried.

"Yes, Fimbul," said Lancaster, and would say no more.

THE DAYS passed uneventfully, in a kind of almost pleasant waiting for time and space to pass behind. Ring found himself increasingly interested in Macaire's undeniably attractive and engaging daughter, who made no attempt to conceal that she was more than interested in Ring. Neither did she make any embarrassing advances, but seemed content to bide her time, to wait for nature to arouse the man to his need for her.

There came a day when a star ahead broadened, swimming with astounding abruptness into greater magnitude, becoming a visibly rounded ball of light-green flame. Beside it swung a smaller dot of darker green. Cautiously Lancaster braked the ship, went into an orbit around the new sun, narrowed the orbit until he swung into another about the green planet.

From above the world was obviously inhabited, but no signs of flying or of ships similar to their own were seen. They settled lower, lower, landed at last upon a great flat plain, dotted here and there with what looked like farmsteads.

The three peered out of the ports of the space ship, and the wonder and fear and awe and anticipation of experiences a totally new world could give gave all a mingled strangeness of sensation like no other. There was no movement on the brilliant green of the smooth turf outside. But the distant trees, with a sleepy look as in a dream, fantastically flowered, teemed with a furtive movement as if an army of monkeys were hidden away among the foliage.

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They ventured out, stopping just outside the airlock. Ring cautioned them: "Remember that you can expect nothing familiar, nothing the same. You must learn to live over again. You are babes, and you must start from scratch to adjust yourselves to an entirely new set of conditions. Take nothing for granted. Some things may resemble familiar things on Earth and still be far, far different in their properties, in their nature. Life especially is a very different thing on this world, under a new sun."

Erica gazed around, listening to Ring's words, trying to orient her thinking to the entirely unknown set of circumstances they faced. It might be unknown, but it certainly looked weirdly familiar. The trees had leaves and limbs; the grass was grass and, being no botanist, she had never known the names of trees and grasses anyway. For all she knew, they were trees similar to those of Earth, though she couldn't recognize any oaks, elms or maples.

Across the grass a vague shadow moved toward them and they looked up, expecting some flying thing above that caused the shadow. But there was nothing...nothing.... Suddenly Erica screamed. "It's a hand!"

"It's two hands," amended Ring, "and we're getting back in the ship—*now!*" He seized the girl, pushed her into the ship and got the bulky Macaire into the lock before the giant hands from the sky, descending slowly, had reached the spot.

Ring stood with his back to the airlock door, wondering. Would the hands be *his* fate this time?

For a long minute the three stood there staring at each other, while Macaire and Erica tried to accept the impossible thing they had seen outside. Then Ring strode forward to peer out the bow, where a huge hemisphere of heavy quartz glass gave vision in all directions. The Director and his daughter peered too, and they watched the huge hands descend and touch the grass where they had been standing, then heard the rasp and gliding sound as the great fingers felt of the ship.

"The body is concealed by a cloud of vapor," explained Ring.

Erica began to sob hysterically, hiding her face against her father's broad chest. He stroked her hair, watching the apparition above them. There was a cloud of vapor floating some twenty feet above the soil, and from it two great arms extended downward, the hands groping about as if the thing in the cloud were blind.

Macaire grasped Lancaster's shoulder. "How does it float? How does it keep that vapor about its body? If it has a body! Why is it blind? Is it groping for us as prey, or from curiosity? And if it can't see, how did it sense us? How did it know where we were?"

The hands retracted now into the vapor cloud and the cloud moved on and disappeared above the distant trees. Lancaster sat down in the pilot's pneumatic cushions and shook his head as if he weren't quite sure it was still there. He groaned, his eyes on the Director's in a kind of mutual despair.

"Very good questions, Macaire. Now, you tell me the answers!"

"Who...what was it?"

"That," said Ring, "was Fimbul!"

RACING toward them across the cropped turf now came a figure out of Never Never Land, riding a very large horse. It was a female figure, and it was a very large horse, but she was ample weight for it. If that horse and rider had been beside some Earth figure for comparison, the latter would have seemed small.

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As she came nearer, eyeing the ship, Macaire gasped in wonder. "Beautiful as a Valkyr!"

Ring held his breath in a kind of painful waiting.

Erica sniffed a jealous disparagement but said nothing, antagonism showing on her intent face.

The girl rode without saddle or bridle, one hand resting easily on the uncropped mane of the great beast. Her only garment was a flowing length of some dark, glittering material caught about her waist with a clasp. Her arms and breasts and neck glittered with jewels, and there were laced boots on her feet. A deep sense of confidence rode with her. One felt that she must own this land on which she rode, or rule over it. She came up to the prow of the ship and sat peering in at them through the nose panes, curiously turning the horse again and again as if the light glared against the panes and she could not see in plainly.

Ring moved off to open the airlock, but Macaire called: "Be careful, man. Are you sure?"

Ring gave a short laugh, said: "Since when do men cower in fear of one woman?", and opened the port. He stepped out, strode up to the huge horse, stood looking up at the beautiful rider. He raised one hand in that universal gesture of peace, palm outward, said: "Onee wan tu vu, plen?"

She swung down from the horse in an easy leap, peered into Lancaster's face, then examined each article of his clothing, touching the fabric, exclaiming over and over: "Allo, nu tu, ah!" Finally she gestured at the open lock behind Lancaster and he stood aside, motioned her to enter. She gave him one searching look, then passed ahead of him into the ship. She moved down the corridor, peering into each little chamber and exclaiming, but one gathered she was only being polite in seeing anything wonderful in their ship, for she was not really astounded or overawed, only curious and unafraid.

Macaire and Erica stood watching, baffled by the barrier of language, but Ring spoke in her tongue: "My friends, the others in the two ships from Earth, what of them?"

Sadly she shook her lovely head. "Chosen!" she whispered. "So it was announced to us only this morning."

Ring gave a curse. "How? Didn't they fire on Fimbul?"

The woman shrugged, her shoulders eloquent. "How can we know the truth? It is whispered they were tricked. At a party, girls lured them from their weapons. That was their undoing, of course."

The lovely equestrienne did not remain long, saying to Ring in her tongue: "I must go and tell my friends and yours of your arrival. I will say good-bye now, but soon I will see you again." She favored Erica and her father with a low bow and left the ship.

IT SEEMED but minutes after this disturbing personality had ridden off when they saw a large company on horseback racing toward them from among the same trees into which she had disappeared. In the lead was the great white horse she had ridden, but bearing now a different rider, not so big a woman, but even more striking in appearance.

"The welcoming committee," commented Erica, trying to sound scornful but not succeeding. These people were a little too awe-inspiring in their physical vigor and striking beauty.

"Could we manage to escape from them if it proved necessary?" asked Macaire, his eyes a little frightened as he watched the approaching band of half-naked, seemingly barbarous riders

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galloping toward them.

Lancaster nodded, smiling a little at Macaire's fears. There was no harm in that bunch of grown-up children, shouting excitedly as they swung their horses to a stop and leaping off beside the ship from Earth. He moved off to open the airlock without even checking the .45 at his hip. In fact, he knew some of them for friends, who also wanted to see an end of Fimbul and all his works. But he did not try to explain that here in Nibisia mankind had but one enemy—the overlord Fimbul—and had never gotten around to making enemies of each other.

They crowded into the ship, patting Ring's shoulder as they passed in a kind of greeting. He knew that most of them had heard of him as one of the Earthmen and already knew much about him from word-of-mouth gossip. But they had not had a chance to see a sky ship capable of crossing space. They had airships—these people were not backward—but they preferred horses.

As one burly fellow shouldered in, Ring recognized a familiar face and, though he could not remember his name, whispered to him: "Wait. I want to speak to you alone."

The man nodded and shoved to the side of the lock, waited until the others had crowded on into the ship to gaze at the mechanical marvels. Then, alone, the Nibisian said: "I know what you want. I didn't see the Overlord take your friends, but I know it is so. Their ships are empty; the maidens who expected to marry them are forlorn. Nearly all of us understand because of this blow at the men from the stars that Fimbul is truly against our progress and means to hold our race back. I've passed word about the water of the springs in the Sea of Life, as your leader instructed us to do. It was lucky that you went back to Earth, or you would have been among those chosen to enter the Blue Doorway of Flame."

Ring nodded, stricken at hearing the news confirmed. He had banked on that group of men. They had been enormously stimulated and changed by their chance discovery of the properties of the springs when they first landed in the crimson sea. Now he must go forward alone, for no one had ever been known to return from the Doorway.

"We must not stop," said Ring. "We will not stop!"

The man looked at Ring's eyes and nodded. "No, we will not. I can see the power in your eyes—the beginning of the powers that the water can give. We will not abandon our oath! We will work toward the goal we have planned, in spite of this blow. But you must stay away from Fimbul, or you too will be taken."

AS THEY talked a woman had been coming nearer to them and seemed to catch the tenor of their conversation. She turned and then Ring recognized her. He cried out in surprise. "Maya! How is it you are so far from the Temple?"

She dropped him a kind of curtsy, then moved close and gave him an affectionate embrace. "I was angry when you let me pass inward without looking at my face, Ring Lancaster! Have you heard the ugly news?"

"Ugly?" Ring's smile was slightly mocking. "From the Mistress of the Rites of Fimbul's Apotheosis, that sounds a little like sacrilege! You must know that my friends have been elevated to the exalted life of the spirits of the Blue Land."

Maya's smile was bitter. "We do not pretend any longer to believe in Fimbul's benevolence, even within the

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Temple. Only when he is present and we know he can hear our thoughts are we careful. The hatred of him has grown beyond all bounds. You must lead us, Ring! You have the God light in your eyes. You must go and take more water before it becomes impossible. He is sure to discover that his secret is no longer his own."

Ring stood with his hand still in the grasp of the temple Mistress, who was teacher and leader of all the many girls who had been selected by Fimbul to serve in the Temple. Temple girls were sworn to continence, were supposed to remain virgins. The penalty was, of course, "elevation" through Fimbul's weird Doorway of the Blue Flame. No one even pretended to understand the Blue Doorway.

Ring intended to go to the strange spring in the Sea of Life in a few days. He expected the crew of Salvage men, his old shipmates, to land there in the craft they had built. He wanted them all to drink of the waters, which gave increased intelligence and vigor at once, and gave increasingly great powers of mind over matter to any who drank there regularly. But he didn't want Maya to know of his plans, for he neither trusted her nor believed she was able to keep her thoughts from Fimbul if she wanted to. But his decision as to what to tell her was made unnecessary by her next remark.

"I have been sent by our Lord and Master to inform you that audience is demanded of you as soon as you can get to the Temple. That is really why I am here. Fimbul sent me as soon as word came that your ship was landing in this area."

AS SHE delivered this message in a kind of sing-song, Maya leaned forward, her grave and beautiful face sad and worried, and in a lower voice, using English words she had learned, said: "Do not go, Ring Lancaster! He will do you as he did your friends."

Ring straightened, his smile turning grim. "I'll be there, Mistress of the Temple. Go now and tell him that I am coming."

Maya nodded and moved out of the door lock slowly, her eyes on Ring's, shaking her head a little as if to stop him with the motion, but knowing it was useless.

Erica, who had come up behind Ring as he said goodbye to the beautiful woman from the Temple, said with a mixture of alarm and indignation: "Ring! Don't you go off and leave us at the mercy of these wild men!"

Ring turned and laughed at her vehemence. "Don't worry, Erica. You'll have to go too. That was implied in the summons. We are ordered to appear before the mighty ruler of this planet, the creature whose hands were groping over the ship. He failed to grab us then, so he expects to get us this way. I hope to surprise him, and perhaps pay him a little for what he has done to these people."

Erica stood waiting, terror in her eyes, as the last of the visitors filed out. When they had gone, there remained three men and six horses.

Macaire came to the lock. "First time I ever entertained a welcoming committee without understanding a word of what was said. Why didn't you interpret a bit, Ring?" He mopped his brow, looked out at the waiting horses, but not getting the significance of them.

"He was in a tete-a-tete with a blonde. Now he says we are ordered to appear before Fimbul."

Macaire paled, catching the grim look on Ring's face and the three mounts' significance. "Is that correct, Lancaster?"

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"Yes, it's correct, Director Macaire, and you may learn how it feels to be called up before a really absolute monarch. He's no friend to Earthmen—he's removed the other twenty-nine from the scene entirely. It's mighty serious, and if you want to go on living, follow my lead. I think I can save us, in the only way anyone can be saved from Fimbul."

"And what is that way?" asked Macaire, his voice reflecting the birth of a great despair.

Ring snapped his jaws together audibly. "You'll learn when the time comes. Get yourselves ready. We've got a long ride ahead of us. The ship will be guarded in our absence by our native friends."

AS THEY rode through the grounds, an expanse of hundreds of acres of exquisitely groomed shrubbery and flower gardens and wide lawns of grass, cropped by herds of beautiful horses, they glimpsed through the trees the incredible beauty of the Temple of Nibis, and felt and understood the awe with which these strong and intelligent people regarded the mysterious life within the forbidden precincts.

They left their mounts and ascended the wide stairs up to the grilled gates of wrought bronze, passing among the elite of the city. Many were standing along the sides of the wide stairs, awaiting their entry, to see the man who had returned to meet the fate Fimbul had meted out to his comrades. Their faces were both sad and angry, sad that he should have thus to walk to his death, angry that it had to be that way, and nothing they could say or do could change it.

Ring nodded to acquaintances, but stopped to speak only once when a youth stepped up to him and pressed his hand and whispered: "I am your brother!"

Ring answered the lad soberly, the strange light glowing in his blue eyes that the Nibisians recognized as the God-light. "Soon all men will be brothers, Finor! Come and see this meeting, and learn."

Within the great reception room of the Temple the throng was dense, and parted right and left to let the Earth visitors through. At close quarters, the brilliance of these people was especially awe-inspiring, and Erica walked in a kind of daze among the men, more handsome than she had ever imagined men could be. These were a potentially mighty race, held down for centuries, for an age, by the strange entity they called Fimbul, which was the Nibisian word for Ruler.

Now they stood waiting, Erica in the center, pale and looking weary and bewildered, her shapely body tired in her bedraggled clothing, but shining through in a fair competition to the beauty of the women around her. Old Macaire stood in his wrinkled gray suit, which looked as if he had slept in it, his pink complexion blanched to a sickly hue. Lancaster, with a grimly tight jaw, stood stiffly erect in his worn leather jerkin and the breeches torn at the knee.

They were within the shrine, an impressive chamber under the vast central dome, surrounded by huge pillars that were supposed to represent the Tenets of the Worship of the Living God, Fimbul. Naturally the most impressive and most massive pillar of all was "Obedience".

At the back of the circular floor rose a shell, fluted and opalescent as a giant bivalve's shell, and within this shell fickered and glowed a weird floating cloud of blue and gray and gold, gleaming with little zig-zags of

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lightning-like energies. This was the Blue Doorway, and from it Fimbul was accustomed to let his voice be heard. Beyond the doorway was the "Blue Land", into which Fimbul himself always withdrew after his occasional forays, and into which he took his "Chosen", never to be seen again. No man alive knew what lay beyond that doorway.

Ring whispered to Erica, his voice eerie in the frightening silence with which the throng awaited "the presence": "The queer thing might even now be watching from within that cloud. . . ." and the eyes of all the people waiting swung to Ring and back again, like many turning white marbles glowing in the dimness.

AS THEY waited, the suspense became terrific. The vast chamber quieted into an ominous silence, and into this silence Ring's next whisper fell like an abomination, unconscionably loud and ill-chosen.

"This blue ghost is the boss of this world, and your guess as to what he is, what he intends, what he wants, or what he thinks, is just as good as the next one's. Even the natives don't understand the Fimbul."

Erica, her face pale and dewed with a fine moisture of nervous sweat, relaxed a little at Ring's calm assessment of the "enigma" as an enigma. Her hand went out to Ring's and he pressed it reassuringly, though his own nerves were wire-taut.

He knew the Fimbul had not summoned Macaire and his daughter, could not know anything of them. The creature wanted his report. He had sent *him* to Earth to learn something, and now he *must* tell. He meant to divulge that information only if it were forced out of him. He had no doubt the weird thing could do just that. The question was, did he want it badly enough? Ring had been sent to learn—

"Exactly!"

The vibrations of the Fimbul's voice, if it could be called a voice, reverberated in the misty reaches of the temple dome like a giant's voice out of the depths of a cavern. Ring cursed softly, remembering now that Fimbul could read his mind when he wished.

"If you will just consider your errand, I will know."

Ring's mind raced furiously in a wild effort to conceal his inner knowledge. For Fimbul had sent Ring to forestall the expedition headed by the Salvage experts for whom he had worked on Earth. Instead, he had told them the truth. That truth he dared not think about.

The voice that had broken into his thoughts with its titanic force now mocked him with a laugh like a gentle wind, rustling leaves and cooing doves distilled into a soft chuckle of sound. Ring knew the creature had penetrated his attempted mental defense—or meant Ring to think he had. With Fimbul, one was never quite sure of anything, until the day came when the hands selected their victim and he was never seen again.

The Overlord's attention moved on, away from Ring Lancaster and his defection, to the vivid, statuesque beauty of Maya, his appointed handmaiden and Keeper of the Temple. "To you, Maya, I give the proper education of the new young thing from Earth. See that she is brought into the light of Fimbul. We cannot have ignorant beauty, and she is very ignorant and very lovely. As for you, Lancaster, *I have understood!* I will enjoy your efforts against me as a diversion from the usual. You have no idea how much

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I appreciate you! You may have this large, over-ripe character you have brought with you as your own charge. See that he becomes indoctrinated in your own version of the Philosophy of Freedom. I am sure that he will be of great value to your 'cause'."

THE MOCKING, gentle laughter sighed away into the depths that seemed to lie behind the shimmering curtain of blue fire-mist, and Ring knew the audience was over. Somehow, he knew that Fimbul had won the hand. But he resolved savagely there would be another deal, and a new game beginning soon. No mystical mummery was going to make a slave of Ring Lancaster. Nor of the Salvage men—and they would soon be on the scene.

But he could not let the audience end like this! He had expected Fimbul to show himself, so that he could put his plan into execution. But he had a substitute plan. He glanced at Maya, standing beside the shimmering blue fire of the Doorway like a living statue, and he nodded at her in an unspoken signal. As she looked questioningly at him, he called loudly. "Tell your Master not to go away yet. I have brought him a present from Earth, and he has not let me give it to him."

Maya took up a slender, long-handled mallet from beside the flame and struck a gong that hung there on a bronze rod. As the notes of the gong rang out, the flame flickered, and the voice of Fimbul came as from afar. "What more is there after I have spoken?"

Maya called out in a seemingly fearful voice: "The man from the stars has brought you a gift. Reach out your mighty hand to receive it from him."

Slowly the flames rose higher, and there appeared in the misty radiance a blue finger-tip, then another and another, until at last the whole great hand stretched out, palm upward.

Ring bellowed in deep, ringing tones so that the whole assembly must hear: "I bring you this, Fimbul, mighty one!" His hand moved like a streak of light, the heavy .45 crashed out in the sacred silence like the crack of doom, and a hole appeared in the palm of the hand. "I bring you pain, Fimbul, perhaps unknown to you. It is to remind you of the pain of your people when their loved ones are wrenched away from them into your Blue Land." The gun spoke again and another bloody hole showed in the palm, and as the pain reached the being behind the flame, the hand was wrenched away and a terrible scream rang through the temple, like the cry of a wounded elephant.

Lancaster shoved the gun back in the holster, and raising his own hand to still the rustle of awe and fear and wonder that ran through the Temple, addressed the throng.

"This Fimbul you worship and allow to dictate to you is a fraud and a disease and a parasite upon you! I say cast off his yoke! I have given him pain for the pain he has caused, a tiny beginning of the vengeance of the people of Nibisia against Fimbul the oppressor! You must resist, and I will help you. Now go, and remember that Fimbul fears to face my bullets, and remains within his Blue Doorway to lick his wounds!"

THE PEOPLE began to pour pell-mell out of the chamber of the shrine, and their eyes upon Lancaster were the eyes of people looking truly upon a god. Macaire, beside the belligerent figure in the torn breeches, swore: "Damn it, man, you've signed our death warrants!"

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Ring laughed. "It's a trick, Macaire," he said in English. "Maya is a two-timer. She has a device there, given her by Fimbul, which saves him a lot of oppressive audiences that he doesn't care to attend. It's a kind of combination radio, televisor, and three dimensional movie projector. Maya and I worked out this little stunt some time ago, and after he left Maya turned on her projector which simulates the hand of Fimbul and stepped behind the screen to make the sound effects. She is an artist at it, having been selected by Fimbul especially for those talents of stagecraft. Together we have convinced the people that I can shoot the fingers off Fimbul and get away with it. The truth is the monster doesn't even know the scene occurred, and by the time he does learn it will be too late for anyone to suffer for it because I will have my own men together and ready for him. Quit worrying. This isn't your game, it's mine."

Macaire's mouth dropped open. "Masterly—masterly! The utter, brazen treachery of that temple girl. She is an artist at that! I felt something was wrong with that scene, but for the life of me I couldn't detect any deception. It was so real!"

"Only one thing," said Ring. "I'm still not sure the real Fimbul isn't a deception too, and Maya the real leader. How do I know? She might be playing me for a fool, and there may be no genuine flesh and blood Fimbul at all. Who can say?"

Erica spoke up. "I hate her, the lush hussy. The way she throws her sex around she isn't to be trusted."

Ring laughed, looked at Erica's scanty garb. "You should talk. . . ." he murmured, then fell silent as the beautiful mistress of the Temple came up to them from the shell.

She walked directly to Erica. "You come," she said in English. Then to Ring in her own language: "It worked as we had planned. But now you must be careful. Fimbul will not be so playful next time."

"I'll be careful," promised Ring. Then, motioning to Erica, "She will be safe?"

Maya looked at Erica and smiled. "Are not the virgins of the Temple always safe?" she asked. Then, taking Erica by the hand, she led her away.

Ring stood silently watching the rich-breasted Maya lead the comparatively virginal-appearing Erica into a long corridor that led out of sight into the lowering blue mist that hid the inner precincts of the Temple from the gaze of the uninitiate and the banned. Only those who accepted Fimbul as their all-highest could enter the Temple beyond this great audience chamber. Ring wondered what Fimbul could have seen in Erica to accept her. A grim smile touched his lips. Fimbul was seeing in her a hostage, an anchor to hold Ring Lancaster against his will. He had seen the affection born of the long space voyage in their minds, seen them clasp hands as they waited, and had seized her to hold over his head. Well, if he thought that would do it, he had another think coming. It would take more than one slip of a girl to hold Ring to his leash. And again the distant voice broke into his savage meditation: "And that more I possess, little man!"

Ring turned savagely to Macaire. "Let's get out of here!" He strode out of the temple of blue flame and delicate mystery, and in him was another flame, red and savage and clean as fire itself.

"Erica—will she be all right?" asked Macaire.

"She'll be safe," said Ring. "As long as Fimbul considers her an

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effective hostage. And not knowing what I'm cooking up for him, of course he does!"

OUTSIDE the Temple Ring paused, his eyes sweeping over the vast dome of the building, searching for the key to its weakness. He knew he would find it somehow. Quite clearly his new powers of mind pointed out the inherent cleanness of such servants of Fimbul as Maya. It was only a matter of proving to them what the Sea of Life really meant—that day would begin the end of the Overlordship. But words would not do it—only by showing them, dramatically, could he hope to change their subservience to revolt. None of the faithful had yet dared to go beyond the shores of the Sea of Life.

Macaire's broad, pink face was a study in frustration. His voice was shaking from nervous strain. "What can we do, Lancaster? What can mere man do to overcome such a being?"

Ring reached out a vigorous arm, slapped him on the shoulder. "It isn't as bad as it seems, man! Quit worrying about Erica. She's taken a longer step toward learning her way around in this place than any other Earth-born. It's a very great honor to be accepted into the Temple. Never mind the sinister aspect of Fimbul. He likes to sound that way. He's got nothing against Erica. Forget your fears. You don't know enough about Nibisia to worry yet. Come along, and I'll open your eyes to the kind of people the UGE has been pushing around for years."

"Eh?" queried Macaire. "What do you mean?"

"My buddies, the chaps I was telling you about when I first met you. I went back to Earth expressly to get them—my errand to you being strictly off-trail. They just landed an hour ago."

"Landed! Another ship from Earth! Impossible!"

"If you can still use that word, you're a cretin! Nothing is impossible on Nibisia. That's why they won't return. Wait till you see."

Macaire panted alongside the quick-stepping spaceman. "How did you hear they landed? I've been right beside you every minute."

Lancaster unclipped a small brown leather case from his belt. He handed it to Macaire. It quivered in his hand as he fumbled with it. A little opening in the side shuttered open and a hoarse voice asked: "Are you there, Ring? Answer, damn it. We get the echo wave of your receiver. What's the matter, Ring, can't you answer?"

Macaire glanced at Ring, and suddenly grinned a surprisingly boyish grin. He spoke into the opening. "This is Ian Macaire, Director of Colonization for the United Governments of Earth. Have you gentlemen registered?"

A raucous curse from the instrument caused Ring to burst into laughter as he retrieved the case from Macaire. "Hello, Abbott," he bellowed into the instrument. "Don't you realize there may be ladies present? What do you mean, cluttering up the nice clean ether of Nibisia with such language?"

"Yah, Ring!" came the voice. "We've been trying to get you for an hour. We landed right in the Red Sea like you told us. But now what? Just sit and wait for the witches?"

"Submerge, you numbskull!" yelled Ring. "This isn't good old Earth where the UGE fumbles around trying to catch you in port. This is Nibisia where you're up against supermen!"

"We are submerged! What do you think we are, a bunch of drunken

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dopes? Get over here. We're all making like drunk, and I'm worried. Are you sure this stuff is safe?"

"Coming, boy! Hold on. Keep on drinking; it won't hurt you if you just remember what I told you. It's good for you."

Lancaster clipped the little receiver back on his belt, started off at an increasing pace. Macaire trotted after, panting weakly. "My god, man, do you think I am a race horse? Where are you going, anyway? Can't you explain anything?"

THE TWO were now leaving the grounds of the Temple and were passing occasional cottages with their little garden patches carved out of the forests that covered most of Nibisia. At one of these Ring turned in, but did not press on the huge and lewdly shaped brass knocker on the wide plank door. Instead he circled the house, entered the tiny barn in the back. Macaire stood waiting and, as Ring led out two great horses from the barn, he protested. "Why, this is thievery, man! You haven't even asked the farmer!"

Ring grinned as he swung aboard the animal which was bridled but without a saddle. "You've got a lot to learn, Macaire. Why don't you accept things until you understand? Nibisians ride horses. They have developed the old western custom of horse exchange to a fine disregard of the so-called property rights. Come on, get aboard. When we arrive at the ship we turn these beasts and they return to their home. These are not wild animals, these are intelligent creatures. Now, watch."

Ring reached out and touched the other beast with his hand. As if in response, the horse knelt ponderously to allow the bulky man from Earth to climb on his back. With puffing protest, Macaire managed to get himself astride. He gasped as the big beast raised on his front feet, then got his back legs erect under him again, pitching the Director back and forth perilously. Miraculously, he retained his seat and found himself riding swiftly along beside Lancaster in a fast trot.

"You see, Macaire," explained Ring, "the people of Nibisia have never heard of theft."

Macaire eyed him doubtfully. "You mean this world is really Utopian in fact?"

"It could be, Mr. Macaire, except for one thing. Behind that Temple and that Fimbul-thing, and beautiful priestesses like Maya, is a sinister something that is sucking the life out of these people. They don't know it. But I do, looking at it from the jaundiced eye of an Earthman's experience with phony cults. I intend to destroy that something."

They rode on in silence. The road they followed was but a kind of cow-path through the bright, park-like forest. As they topped a slight rise, beyond gleamed the silvery cylindrical ship in which they had come to the planet. Macaire heaved a sigh of weary acceptance. "I'll just have to follow your lead, son. I'll back your play until I know better. After that, if you're wrong, I'll do my best to thwart you. Remember that!"

Ring nodded, his eyes on the wintry blue pupils above the fat cheeks of the old man. "I'll buy that, Macaire; but I'm not wrong. Fimbul overplayed his hand when he took the crews of those three ships into his Blue Land."

They got down from their horses, turned them loose, and entered the ship.

"Get ready for some acceleration," said Ring. "We're going half way around this planet in the next thirty minutes."

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BENEATH them the water was red, with white-topped waves racing toward a distant blue shoreline. They went down until the waves became a kind of madness reaching up for them, the sea a sea of boiling blood, thick, heavy, yet agitated by some vast undermovement, for there seemed no wind to cause those waves.

Frightened by the strangeness of the sea, Macaire protested. "You can't drop this ship into that madness!"

Lancaster, his little receiver in his hand, the jet throttles in the other, lowered the ship down until the crimson waves crashed against them and then were gone as they sank into the silence of the fluid beneath. A dim, pinkish glow filtered through the ports. Abruptly Lancaster closed the jet throttle, let the ship seek its level. They drifted slowly down as he let the weird fluid into the ballast tanks to check the upward rise that would come as soon as their dive impetus was absorbed.

"Hello, Abbott." Ring spoke into the little device in his hand.

"Where away, sailor?" queried the tinny voice from the instrument.

"How do I know?" answered Ring. "I didn't want to hit your signal dead center. I'm probably a mile or so south of you. I'll cruise north just under the surface waves. You come to meet me."

"Roger, flyboy. Be bumping into you."

It was perhaps twenty minutes before the instruments gave him the pip-pip of metal nearby. He shut off the tail jets, applied the nose jet briefly to check his progress. Seconds later the two ships bumped gently.

"Make airlock connection, same as in space," directed Ring over his communicator. "We're coming aboard."

Within fifteen minutes the lock had been connected, the water pumped out, and air admitted. Then Ring opened his airlock and stepped into the tube, followed by Macaire. The other ship's lock opened and in a moment they were inside. Ring shook hands enthusiastically with Abbott and with other members of the crew. He introduced Macaire.

"Meet the UGE," he said, then laughed at their frowns. "You see, Macaire, you aren't very well liked among this gang of political criminals." He turned back to the crew of the Salvage ship. "Boys, I had to kidnap Mr. Macaire, but not because he double-crossed me. His daughter, it seems, wanted to see space. The result was, she had us followed, on the way to the ship, and I had to take them along to prevent the UGE police from finding out about you and raiding you. But Macaire seems to have had a change of heart and wants to work with us—until we prove to be off the beam. In that event, he's against us."

Abbott looked at Macaire. "Fair enough," he grunted. "I'll admit I'm as much in the dark as he is. So now that we friendly enemies know each other, how about giving us the picture?"

"I'll do that right now," said Lancaster. He launched into an account of the happening since they had landed, and wound up with the account of the secret plans between himself and the Nibisians.

"So far so good," said a man named Drake, a one-eyed, one-armed diver who had helped salvage the two rockets from the Pacific. "But what about this water we're drinking? It sure does things to you. I feel like a new man."

"How would you like a new arm and a new eye?" asked Ring.

Drake grunted. "From drinking water?" he asked. The disbelief in his voice was all too obvious.

"Just keep drinking it," said Ring. "And for a demonstration of what it can do, get me a big glass bowl from the galley and a handful of dirt."

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"Dirt?" asked Abbott. "Where would we get dirt on a spaceship?"

One of the crew spoke up. "I've got a geranium in my quarters," he said, rather embarrassedly.

"Get it," said Ring.

IN A MOMENT he had both bowl and dirt, and he promptly upended the bowl over the dirt on a table, after pouring some of the water from the sea outside on the dirt. Then he sat back to watch. The others watched too, and saw the spectacle of life beginning in the tiny microcosm and develop into amazingly complex forms.

"Just the microbes in the soil, evolving under the influence of the water," said Ring. "It'll grow anything—and keep it in perfect shape. That means new arms and eyes to those who have lost them."

"Lad," said Drake gruffly, "if that's true I'll kiss your hand!"

"This water," explained Ring, "occurs in this one great spring which gushes up from the bottom of this sea. We are over the main spring now. For ages, the overlords—or Fimbul—have kept it to themselves, making it a forbidden area. I found it by pretending an emergency landing to repair a burnt-out valve. It loses its powers, apparently, by dilution, so that its effects are noted only near the outlet. We're going to open this area up to all the inhabitants after we clean up the Overlords, whoever and whatever they are."

"What makes you think these overlords can't wipe us out if we rile them?" asked Drake.

"No weapons that I can learn about. But their natural powers are enough, provided we don't pick up some of our own drinking this water—and I'm counting on that. The weird powers they possess include telepathic domination of others' minds, projection of impossible images, seeming projection of their own bodies into fantastic forms that float about. I don't know if it is their own bodies or mere images they create in the minds about them."

"What powers can we pick up?"

Ring grinned. "The ability to detect a mental image from the real thing, for instance."

"Hell of a lot of good that will do if it proves to be the real thing," said Drake sarcastically.

"Not a bit!" said Ring. "The *real* thing will answer to an explosive bullet just as well as we would. And that's where we hold an advantage. Once we recognize the real thing we can gun it down, and no fooling."

"What's really wrong with their rule?" asked Abbott. "Maybe the people don't really want it upset. Religions are funny things, you know, and their followers even funnier."

"He's got their support all right," grunted Macaire, breaking into the conversation. "If I've ever seen a bunch of mutineers, they're it!" He grinned at the group around him. The remark and the meaning glance brought answering grins to the faces of the Salvage Independents.

"You're okay," remarked one of them. "Guy with a sense of humor like that can't be one of the UGE gang, not at heart."

Ring went on with his story. "Fimbul—whatever he is, or whatever is back of him in actuality—is against all progress, fearing to lose his prerogatives—which includes the freedom to 'choose' servants at will: a great hand comes down, picks up the 'chosen', and they are never seen again. I want to know where they go, and what happens to them, and why—the secrecy about it. Here it is accepted

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as we of Earth accept God—as a natural power about which we can do nothing."

"You don't need to explain further why this thing ought to be eliminated," grunted Abbott. "That's enough for me. Sounds a lot like the UGE sending men into space with no thought of their safety."

MACAIRE winced, turned pale, but he squared his shoulders and stood erect. "Maybe I had that coming, and maybe I—didn't," he said. "Maybe even the Director of the Bureau has to take his orders just as these Nibisians take theirs from Fimbul."

"You mean we're right when we say there's a type of 'Fimbul' on Earth?"

"It should be obvious to any but a fool," said Macaire levelly.

Abbott stood up. "The sooner we get at this Fimbul, the better," he said. "What's the plan? And do we have enough manpower? We number a hundred, and with the crews of the other three ships—"

"Write them off," said Ring.

"What do you mean? Aren't they with us? I thought you said they were sold on this planet? If that's true, why—"

"They've been...chosen," said Ring. "Taken into the Blue Land by the Hands of Fimbul. And nobody who goes into the Blue Land is ever seen again."

Drake's one eye flashed, and he growled in sudden anger. "Then we'll go it alone, by God!" he said.

"We're not going to be alone," said Ring, a peculiar gleam in his eye. "In a short time we're going to be reinforced by a hundred deserters from the Temple of Nibis."

Macaire looked at Ring, startled. "Deserters! But there aren't any men in the Temple, only—"

Ring's grin broadened. "Only young, beautiful virgins," he finished. "Men, when you see our new recruits, you'll want to wipe up this Fimbul with your bare hands! I might add, there's a hundred of them, one for each of you."

Old Drake broke the amazed silence with an action that brought yells from the men. Very deliberately he poured himself a large glass of the red water and drank it down with a gulp.

"Bring 'em on," he said. "I feel ten years younger already!"

Ring waited until the outburst of laughing subsided, then he went on. "Seriously, men, we are colonists here. We'll all need wives, since we didn't bring any with us. So what I've arranged is sensible. I've already picked my girl, and you'll see her soon. I suggest that you all do the same. Then we'll stay here awhile and let this water work its wonders on all of us. As we wait, we'll prepare for what I'm sure will be a tough struggle. But we'll have help."

"What kind of help?" asked Abbott.

"The real rulers, once, of this planet. The beings the people still remember in legend as the Water Gods. I ran across them by accident when I set my ship down here in that feigned repair job. It seems they watch over the planet but do not interfere greatly. Some ancient code prevents their taking direct action in the affairs of any other living creature. But they do not object to acting in an advisory capacity—providing they are asked. The Nibisians still ask, but they do it by means of dances and throwing flowers into the Pool of the Water Gods in the Temple. It is said that if the flowers sink into the water at the center, the prayer will be answered.

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But if the flowers float back to shore, the plea is rejected. Actually, however, nobody has gone to the real home of these beings, the deeps below us, to ask for advice in thousands of years."

"Mere advice won't do us much good when the showdown comes. Just how do we go about acting against Fimbul? Just charge in on him with hand weapons?"

"If we have to we'll do just that. But we don't want to give battle in his own area. He lives beyond a queer veil, and I suspect it is not even our own dimension, but some place unapproachable by any ordinary means. We don't want to get fouled up in those mysterious barriers Fimbul uses for doorways. But we will learn that secret, I think, from the Water Gods. What I think will happen is that Fimbul will come chasing his deserting virgins and we will knock hell out of him when he catches up with us, if we can. That will happen right here, probably."

"Craft approaching on the surface!" exclaimed one of the Salvage men, pointing to the radar screen. A pip was moving slowly across it, coming directly toward the submerged ships.

MAYA LET down the ladder from the side of the borrowed airship. Her girls, the Yladr of the Temple, crowded about her, staring down at the boil of the forbidden spring of life—the ring of outward waves, the strange red water. Already they felt the exhilaration that came from the weird water into their young bodies, making all about them seem vastly more beautiful. And in their hearts was another kind of anticipation.

Then the backs of the Earth ships broke water beside them like leviathans coming to the surface, and the girls gave little cries of mingled fear and joy, peering for the first glimpse of the men from the stars.

It was a curious meeting. Each group was shy of the other, and could speak only through Maya or Ring. The girls laughed and commented to each other on the appearance of the Earthmen, and in their minds selected the one who most appealed to them—sometimes getting Maya to introduce them to the one they chose.

The Earthmen were vastly taken with the looks of the Nibisian girls, who were all tall and strong, with a skin more red than Earth women's, and with startlingly light hair. In their turn, the girls were fascinated by the black locks and dark eyes of the Earthmen.

Ring maintained guard while the introductions went on, keeping a lookout for Fimbul's possible pursuit. Maya came to him as he watched, and he turned to her.

"Did you bring the bell?" he asked.

"Yes. Are we to call the Water Gods now?" she asked.

"Why not? We've burned our bridges behind us. We must act soon. Fimbul may be able to read of this meeting in your minds. If he does—"

"He will pursue. But certainly, in the ships we can escape. He cannot follow into space. We can plan our attack there."

"Get the bell," said Ring.

Maya went to the airship to get the bell, and another form detached itself from the group of women and came forward. It was Erica. "You're quite friendly with the Priestess of the Temple of Nibis," she said.

Ring looked at her. "You emphasize the title," he said. "Do you think she isn't friendly to me?"

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Erica shrugged. "I don't say anything about that. I don't know. But aren't you putting a good deal of trust in an unknown quantity? Fimbul must trust her greatly, to give her the powers he has. Is one of her qualities loyalty?"

"We will find out in a few minutes," said Ring mysteriously. "Also, we will find out about you, and your father."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

He looked sober. "Let's call it a judgment."

"Judgment?"

"You'll see," he said. And would say no more.

Maya returned from the airship with a small bronze bell of strange and very ancient craftsmanship. Then, as all the crew and the assembled virgins of the Temple gathered on deck, Maya lowered the bell into the red water and began to swing it slowly to and fro. It rang softly, muffled by the water, but with a peculiarly penetrating sound that seemed to enter their very brains.

FOR LONG moments there was silence, except for the tolling of the bell, and then a movement in the depths answered the bell. The men from Earth recoiled in astonishment as an enormous globe of a head rose half out of the water beside the ships. It was round and green colored, and its eyes were just visible above the water level as it peered at them.

Ring and Maya moved to the rail of the deck. "It looks like the head of a giant human," said Ring, "and I never did find out what was below, even when I first saw a Water God."

Maya whispered to him. "It has limbs, and a body, but not like a man. There is no creature for me to compare. You will see this time, I am sure...."

She began speaking in a kind of chant, expressing her greeting to the strange green head peering from the water. As she chanted, other heads appeared, until there were a dozen grouped around the ship, peering at them from their barely exposed eyes.

"We greet you, O God of the Waters, and give homage, we who remember you. I am Maya, who serves the Fimbul in the Temple that once was yours, and may be again, if our plans mature. Help us now, O Water Gods, to erase the evil that has come over Nibisia. It is not beyond your power, I know, to tell us what we must do. For you must know the Fimbul is a danger, even to you, and that he must die! How can we accomplish this?"

The creature who had first appeared stirred his limbs and there rose slowly the remainder of the weird countenance. Ring felt a shudder of utter strangeness, as at meeting a ghost or a demon in the flesh. For the body of the creature was a great flat bag. It was evident its mode of locomotion was similar to that of a squid. Its limbs were long and serpentine, not tentacles, but jointless arms with two-fingered hands. One of these long arms rose and reached out to Maya, a distance of at least thirty feet. The leathery fingers touched her lightly on the forehead. Her eyes went blank for an instant, then the tentacle was removed.

Maya turned to her Temple girls and directed them to come forward. Each in turn walked to the rail and stood while they met the touch of the creature's fingers unflinchingly, then moved off to stand blank-eyed, waiting.

Ring saw that there was an instantaneous hypnotism being practiced here, of a kind and power like nothing he had ever heard of.

Then came Erica's turn, and a look

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of horror on her face gave the creature pause. But it reached out, touched her gently, then released her. She did not assume the blank stare of the other girls, but turned and looked strangely at Ring, then walked slowly over to stand beside Maya.

"You will return to the Temple of Fimbul."

The creature in the water seemed to have spoken, but there were no audible words.

OBEDIENTLY the Temple girls clambered aboard their airship and took their places. Erica, too, climbed aboard. Maya turned to Ring. "We will meet at the Blue Doorway," she said, then she too turned and boarded the aircraft. She set the curious, flat, oval craft in motion, its long vanes beating the air like a helicopter. It rose almost vertically, then flew off.

Ring Lancaster turned to the creature still floating idly in the water. "Will you explain?" he asked.

For answer the tentacle whipped toward him, the fingers touched him on the forehead. There was an instant of brilliant white light in his brain, then all was as before, and the creature withdrew its tentacle. Slowly the green heads sank beneath the surface and were gone.

Abbott rushed up to Ring, cursing. "What in hell was all that?" he asked.

Ring looked at him. He shook his head. "I don't know," he said truthfully. "But don't worry about it. The information we need has been given to me."

"Well, out with it. What did that green-head tell you?"

"I don't know. I won't know until the proper time. All I know now is that we must remain here ten days and drink of the water of the Spring of Life. Then, on the tenth day, I will know what to do."

Abbott stared, then shrugged. "Well, at least that doesn't seem at variance with our original plans. But what about those girls? They've gone back to the Temple—and there was one of them I kinda had my eye on."

Ring smiled. "That I can tell you," he said. "You'll have the girls back in ten days."

AT THE END of the tenth day, Ring Lancaster sat in the control room of the spaceship. Beside him sat Bud Abbott. At the opposite side of the room Macaire stood staring out into the murky red water beyond the ports. He was wearing a pair of overalls borrowed from one of the younger men of the Salvage crew, and his trim, muscular body glowed with health. His head was covered with a new growth of heavy black hair, and the original sickly pink of his complexion had been replaced by a healthy ruddy hue. He seemed to be a robust thirty-five instead of his actual sixty-five years. He was smiling. Beside him Drake was carving an ornate design on his pipe bowl with a penknife and his new fingers moved deftly and surely. His eyes were clear and bright and gleaming with a new exultance.

Ring turned toward the controls. "Tell the men to strap in for acceleration," he said. "We're going to the Temple of Nibis."

"I suspected as much," commented Abbott. He wrinkled his brows a moment and then smiled. "They're in," he reported.

Drake spoke from his own acceleration bunk across the room. "That telepathy sure beats the old communication system!"

Ring laughed. "Sure does. And Abbott is a whiz at it."

He got into the pilot's seat and took the ship up to the surface. Once there he lifted it on its jets with a

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roar, and it soared into the sky and headed toward the opposite side of the planet.

When acceleration had subsided, Abbott spoke. "What do we do? Has your memory come back?"

"We land on the Temple grounds," said Ring shrugging. "We land with all weapons trained on the Temple proper where the Blue Doorway is located. Then we march in and take over."

"Sounds almost too simple," remarked Macaire.

"Yes," said Abbott, "it does." He looked thoughtful.

"What else could we do?" asked Ring. "Either we've got to play ball, or do it our own way—and wouldn't our own way be just about the same thing?"

"Yes," admitted Abbott. "We'll be face to face with Fimbul, and if I'm not mistaken he'll be ready for us. But we'll know the difference between illusion and reality, and I guess we can handle reality with our guns."

"That's it, then," said Ring. "The die is cast."

They landed the ship in the middle of a large lawn, and sprang to battle stations. Half the crew manned the guns and cannon of the spaceship, the other half marched from the airlock and across the lawn to the wide stairway leading to the main Temple.

Ring and Abbott were in the lead, followed by Macaire and Drake marching smartly behind them in command of the rest of the Salvage crew with drawn guns.

A few startled Nibisians stood watching them and then, as if by magic, a crowd began to collect. There was a vast excitement, and as the Salvage men marched into the temple a few brave souls followed. The rest remained behind, eagerly interested but cautious. The fear of the Fimbul was evident on their faces.

SUDDENLY from inside the Temple came a series of crashes, and the screams of women. But they were triumphant screams, and as Ring and Abbott raced into the room of the Blue Doorway they saw the women swinging heavy instruments and smashing secret equipment behind screens and about the Blue Doorway. For an instant the Blue Doorway flickered into life, and then it died again.

"So that's it!" yelled Abbott. "The girls were conditioned to throw monkey-wrenches into the works. That'll give us time to take this place over but good!"

Rapidly the men dispersed to the vantage points and took up positions. A cordon ringed the opalescent shell of the weird Blue Doorway, and rapid-firing guns were wheeled into position. Armed with grenades, others stood in commanding positions. In a matter of moments the Temple was a bristling fortress surrounding the gateway to the Blue Nowhere in which Fimbul was momentarily blocked from egress.

Ring strode up the stairs to the platform before the Blue Doorway where Maya stood awaiting him, a strangely blank look on her lovely face. Beside her stood Erica, looking at Ring palely.

"Maya!" cried Ring. "What next? I haven't any further advice in my mind."

Maya's look was still blank, and Erica spoke lowly. "Take her in your arms, Ring. She's yours. It will be a signal."

Puzzled, Ring stared at her a moment. "You mean...?"

"You're in love with her, aren't you?" said Erica with a sad smile. "She's the one you have selected for your wife?"

"Yes," said Ring. "But how did you know?"

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"The Water Gods told me. But take her in your arms. Hurry!"

"What's wrong with her?"

"Hurry, Ring!"

Lancaster stepped forward, grasped Maya in his arms and crushed her unyielding body to him. Then suddenly the Temple was filled with the blue light of the Doorway, and Maya came to life in Ring's arms. Her strong arms encircled him, and with a quick motion she stepped back, drawing him with her. Caught off balance, Ring plunged with her into the Blue Doorway. There was an instant of tingling electric energies, and then Ring lost consciousness.

On the other side of the Doorway Erica seized a heavy metal bar and smashed at the instruments behind the curtain beside the door. The blue light went out again, and she slumped to the Temple floor, sobbing.

Bud Abbott gave a great curse, then leaped at the darkened Doorway and crashed against a solid masonry wall. There was no way to enter the Blue Land. Ring Lancaster was a captive of Fimbul in the place from which no one ever returned.

WHEN RING and Maya regained consciousness they found themselves lying in a corridor of stone, alone. Maya got slowly to her feet and looked questioningly about her, a look of horror growing on her face. Ring came erect beside her, noting a sickly stench in the air.

"Is this part of the plan?" he asked.

She nodded, but did not speak.

"What makes you shudder like that, girl?" he asked, feeling the hairs rise along the nape of his neck at the look on her face.

"The Fimbul keeps certain sea monsters in these corridors. This is a labyrinth where he places his disobedient servants. I have been taken through them. If I can but remember..."

She put out a cold, stiff hand to him. He took it and she led him along the corridor, her eyes blank with an inner awareness and with a certain air of compulsion. Ring tugged out his gun as the musky, sweetish odor grew stronger. He could hear a wet, sliding, shuffling sound behind them.

It was an empty corridor where no lights showed but the dim, cold blue mist glowing about them. There was no sound, no distant voice, but there was a sentient shudder in the very air, and Ring walked with an utter caution such as he had never felt before.

As they passed over a slot in the floor, a metal grille rose silently behind them. Ring whirled, his finger tightening on the trigger. But there was only the cold shimmer of the metal cutting off all retreat. Maya went on, and Ring clutched her cold hand that was like the hand of one already dead.

The corridor slanted vaguely down, turned and ascended, and an occasional door in the wall was each time shut and silent and immovable. The light lessened until they walked in almost total darkness, and somewhere to one side the wet shuffle came again, seemed to hasten nearer.

They came to a stair head and to the right the stair ascended, cold gleaming metal treads slippery with moisture. Maya paused before the stair that led down, as if in doubt, then chose the upward stair. Her eyes were blank and empty and waiting for some thing that she could not think about for dread.

Up and up the stair, well led, turn and rise and turn and rise forever, until Ring's legs were lead and his breath burned like fire in his chest.

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But Maya, like a tireless automaton, went up and up steadily, her breath calm and even and her face frozen in that look of chill horror that would not leave.

The stair ended at a flickering blue curtain of fire that wove itself about a metal grille that barred the way. But Maya, as if guided by a mind not her own, thrust a finger into a tiny crevice in the wall, and the grilled lifted; but the flickering curtain of blue fire remained. She stepped through, and Ring moved after with his gun half raised to fire at the first movement beyond that curtain.

MAYA WAS standing before an embroidered fabric that hung from wall to wall. Blue herons moved stately limbs on the shining fabric, rippling from a breeze beyond. Maya's hands against the fabric were drained of blood, but her eyes suddenly came alive, warning Ring of the thing they would face beyond, and he knew without a word being spoken. Beyond was the Fimbul!

She parted the curtain suddenly, whipping it open and behind them, so that they stood abruptly on the far side.

Ring's gun hand lowered and he gazed stupidly, not at any monstrous Fimbul of unguessable age, but at a score of naked women grouped lazily about a stone dais. It was a beautiful chamber, this room in the tower's top; of marble-like stones and blue-veined chalcedony pillars, with hangings of richly embroidered silk, on which were every kind of plant and flower and graceful bird, giving the room the air of a pavilion in the forest.

But the most utterly beautiful things in the amazing room were the women, sleepily eyeing the two intruders as if just awakened from some sweet and impossibly delightful dream of love, and the eyes that looked at Ring Lancaster gave off an energy of vitality not human, but other-world and other-thinking, as if they had never seen man before and found the sight particularly enchanting.

But Maya ignored these ultra-fascinating females as if they were but sculptured decorations that should rightly have been placed against the wall. She moved across the gleaming floor with a silent quickness, as if haste and caution were at war within her. Ring strode after, on the balls of his feet, knowing that Maya did nothing without good reason.

The women's charms drew his eyes like a magnet, but he watched only Maya's sleek hips, wondering why the beautiful things uttered no sound at sight of them. On the far side of the chamber Maya parted another curtain of shimmering blue force.

She stepped through and, swiftly as Ring followed, he was in time only to hear her gasp and feel her hand slip from his. As his sight cleared from the tingling shock of the vibrant curtain, he saw a tall, gray figure standing not six feet away, and the priestess at his feet, her gleaming hair tumbled in fallen glory around her head, motionless in a rigid obeisance.

A flare of fear chilled his heart, and Ring glared at the eyes of the man-like form, clothed in a soft gray fabric, muffled into a shapeless roundness, as if the occupant were wadded into rolls of gray silk. But the neck on the shoulders was a round pillar of pink flesh, and the face was the face of no man, but a thing of great, bulging brows and wide eyes and gray and cold as death itself. Not a man, but a thing like a man in the possession of a rounded,

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dome-like head above staring eyes, wide, flat cheeks that did not end in jaws, but passed into the powerful neck without bone or ripple of flesh. Where his mouth should have been was a horrible blood-red circular organ, softly moving and sliding with a separate life of its own, and the crimson circle did not need to open for Ring to know that the mouth had never possessed teeth, but something more destructive and inconceivable.

Ring's gun hand came up level with the thing's chest, and his voice was the sound of chipping metal: "Fimbul! Face to face! I have longed for this moment."

The pale eyes glowed, and the glow increased moment by moment, holding Ring's gaze fixed on twin blades of force. Slowly the gun hand relaxed, until once more his gun swung at his side at arm's length.

In his mind the mocking thought-sound of the Fimbul moved like a soft wind, and the Fimbul said: "I am delighted to have you where I can amuse myself with your death. And you have brought this treacherous servant with you. How very thoughtful! I did not expect this excellent service from you!"

RING GLANCED down at the glorious spread of Maya's soft hair upon the stones of the floor, and the motionless, stiffly-cramped posture of her figure. A rage raised in his breast, his gun hand lifted an inch, two inches; but he looked at the thing again and the energy drained from his arm, letting it fall helplessly.

"Before you pass on, dear visitor," the soft, almost pleasant wind in his mind was saying, "I would like you to see what I have done with the great numbers of beautiful Nibisian females I have imported into my domain. You have asked to know what happens to them, and I delight at granting your wish. I am sure you will enjoy the sight, for no other man has ever seen such women before today."

A command whirred through Ring's helpless mind, and he moved ahead of the Fimbul-thing, through a curtain of darkness, staggering a little because the orders to his limbs were not his own.

The mental voice purred on, explaining: "The Water of the Great Spring in the Sea of Life has been very useful to me, creating from mere drab flesh-and-blood organisms the most delightful tidbits for my peculiar tastes. Look...."

Ring saw a doorway ahead open, across which a metal grille-work remained, and he peered through. Within he saw a steamy spray, falling steadily from openings in the ceiling, and moving through the spray the bodies of a dozen tall Nibisian women—but not the lovely, normal girls he knew as natural to this planet. No, the growth induced by this water from the strange spring had created from their flesh a new form of womanhood, glowing with an energy of life at its saturation point. Desire in them was an unbelievable tension, pressing from their limbs and breasts, parting their lips, gliding over their brows like the light from an angel's ecstasy, gilding the curling locks of their hair with an aura of utter allure.

In spite of his every effort to control himself, Ring found he was trying to force his way through the very metal of the bars, as if the pressure of his body alone would dissolve the metal. In his mind the mockery of the thought-voice laughed softly, with a kind of madness not human, but madness from a thing of the sea-

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bottom, or of the gutters of a pestilent city; the utterly uncomprehendable laughter of a mind that had looked on beauty for an age and never seen it.

"They are not for you! Oh, no, my little man from the stars! These tidbits are for my own lonely banquets here in my tower of love. When they lose all their mind in the will toward mating, when they beg me—then I take them and they submit greedily to . . ."

The thought that came to Lancaster's mind was beyond acceptance and Lancaster retched as he tried to grasp the utter horror of the death of beauty and human life this horrid creature represented. He had plucked the finest fruit of the Nibisian race from their race-tree, subjected it to the extreme essence of life's vitality—for the titillation of that pink appetite that was an abomination on his face. This was truly a parasite without parallel in loathsomeness, that had the power to raise these women to goddess-like estate—then eat them alive!

AS THE curtain fell behind the grille, Ring staggered back from the doorway, his whole being filled with a conflict between the repulsiveness of Fimbul and the utter attraction of these women who were no longer mere women, but something far beyond humanity. Captives without resources, their minds and bodies utter slaves to this thing. To Ring, the message of their beauty was plain: he must free them of this monster, or forever after his name would live in shame.

Ring threw a thought at Fimbul. "There is no depth of slime more foul than you. Is this what you have done with the life that nature gave you? Is this all you have accomplished in the centuries you have lived? Is that what the life in you is for? Is your appetite all of your imagination?"

But insult the Fimbul as he would, he could not free his limbs of the hold the strange creature held on them. The thing led him on, back along the corridors, and showed him room after room in which his captives moved and waited and longed for life, while the weird growth force in the water transformed their bodies into staggering beauty for the purpose of superior tidbits for the digestive apparatus of a superior slug!

Ring gagged and raged, and strove against the creature's mental powers. And the Fimbul's entertainment ended as they returned to the chamber where Maya lay in her frozen obeisance full length upon the floor.

The Fimbul released her from his mental spell, and the priestess tried to rise, but Ring was moved to help her, for she could not stand. Supporting her half-fainting figure, Ring led her back through the curtains of force into the chamber where the score of naked beauties still lazily slumbered about the stone dais and seat, which had taken on a new significance to Ring's numbed mind. It was the Fimbul's dining table, that seat and dais—and these were the "chosen" from whom he would presently select a meal.

Behind them the Fimbul moved like a tall cocoon of gray silk, shapeless, the silk rippling in fold on circular fold all about that body that Ring knew now must be precisely similar underneath—fold on fold of ringed, gray flesh that had no connection with humanity except its appetite for human flesh.

Quite suddenly Maya stiffened and jerked erect in his arms and her eyes flashed him one potent warning. Then she glided from his arms, smiling, her

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utterly enchanting face irresistible with a willed abandon that every curve of her body accentuated. Her lips moved as Ring heard her murmur: "Let it be *now*, oh Fimbul, if I must die! I have waited for your call so long...long..." and she glided against the soft, gray cylinder of his body. Her arms went around him, and with closed eyes she pressed her lips to that crimson, circular horror on the Fimbul's face.

For an instant Ring was frozen with astonishment, but his numbed mind spelled out the truth: Maya was a mistress of an art, a supreme actress.

AS HE watched in horror, a kind of lust that was too repellent to accept in his mind swept over the figure of the Fimbul and the steely gray light of power in his eyes dulled; the lids lowered for an instant as he tasted the lips pressed so avidly to his own—and in that instant the Fimbul's hungry reaching for the ecstasy of life that was forever beyond his true comprehension relaxed his control of Ring's muscles. Ring found his gun lifting, his tense fingers tightening on the trigger. The strain on his muscles had rendered them jerky, faulty of control, and now that Fimbul's control was gone, the gun spoke. Maya staggered back from the pillar of gray horror, her hands clutching at her side in pain, but her face expressing only an utter triumph, a joyous exaltation of victory.

For an instant the Fimbul stood there, his inhuman face with the round pink O of an unending astonishment stretched out into a gulping for the pleasure that had turned into the bitter taste of pain. In that instant when Maya staggered back, the flame of rage rose in Ring blindingly. His finger clenched again and again, and with each jolting crack of explosion, he cursed: "May all Hell's universes greet your ugly soul!"

For a long minute the Fimbul tottered, the folds of gray silk about the ringed body writhing over each other as the ancient life in him writhed and let each ring slip down, folding one over the other weirdly until the strange bulged head rested upon a circular heap of seeming empty rings of slimy silk. The eyes shot one last look at the raging face of the man who had killed him, then down at the yellow ichor oozing out in a widening filth on the gleaming floor. Unbelief struggled on the stinking face with utter agony, then the power in the eyes died and Fimbul had tasted his last feast.

Maya had sunk to one knee, her hand clutching at her side, but her eyes feeding with a fierce pleasure on the sight of Fimbul collapsing into death. Ring shook himself out of the thrall of the ugly sight and sprang to her side, tearing her gown from her back and shoulders to find the wound.

In her side, next to her ivory breast, a small mouth welled bright blood down her golden flesh. Ring wadded up her torn gown, pressed it to the wound, crying. "It was the way his mind held me— I had no true control when you diverted his attention!"

She smiled, her pain making it a twisted, yet beautiful thing. "I know, dear one. I had to risk it—for he had to be killed."

Ring lifted her in his arms and pressed his lips to hers. Then he strode with her from the ghastly chamber of Fimbul's dining room.

WITH THE death of Fimbul all horror in the fortress of the strange dimension beyond the Blue

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Doorway ended. The captive women were released—to drive Nibisian as well as Earthmen mad with desire—and the Blue Doorway—was forever closed to all, its secret science smashed irreparably.

Macaire and his daughter Erica chose to return to Earth. Said Macaire: "I am eternally grateful to you, Ring, for what you have given both of us. But back on Earth there is a very real Fimbul who must be destroyed, just as you destroyed the Fimbul here. I would like to spend the rest of my life bringing true freedom to the people of Earth. I owe it to them."

Erica kissed Ring once, fiercely, on the lips, then said: "I'll go too, Ring, and perhaps I can help Father in his work. I am sure that more rockets will blast into space, when we return with the truth, and perhaps I can go with one of them and find a new world, and a new, more real, and less selfish happiness than I grasped for so unworthily. I wish you and Maya all happiness, and a full life, rich as Nibisia can make it."

The ship that took the UGE official and his daughter back to Earth was the last contact between the planets, agreed upon by Macaire and Ring Lancaster. "There are thousands of worlds as beautiful and healthy as Nibisia in space, and they are not already populated by a race of people such as Nibisia is. Earth colonists can go to them easily, and Earth's problems will be solved. Then, perhaps, when the Earth Fimbul is dead, we can contact each other in true friendliness, without the danger that would exist now in such a contact."

On Nibisia, Maya, former high priestess of Fimbul, recovered from her wound without a trace, thanks to the magic water of the Spring of Life, and was rewarded for her part in the destruction of the monster by being elected "Fimbul" for a term of six years by popular vote.

Lancaster, not to his surprise, found himself appointed by the new Fimbul to the office of "Consort, Husband, and Secretary of State".

The leisure-loving Nibisians soon found the water of the Spring giving them new powers, and they moved to the labor of building schoolhouses to house the children under the new mental-freedom laws.

The first genuine problem that darkened the rule of the new Fimbul was truancy from school. The result of the cabinet meeting held to solve this weighty matter was a law condemning truants to the unpleasant and harsh discipline of writing on the blackboard one hundred times "I must not skip school."

So Nibisia settled down to become a good world where people are pleasant and pleased to do as they please without interference from officials of any kind.

And on Earth, new ships lance upward in search of new worlds, unaware that Nibisia exists.

THE END

# HOW NOT TO PRODUCE

OF ALL the ways to lose weight, skipping breakfast is not one of them.

Recently, at the University of Iowa, four studies were made to find out what the benefits were in indulging in this first meal of the day, or in skipping it. The result demonstrated that those who gave in to their appetites first thing in the morning showed increased work output, faster reactions, and less fatigue.

Neither a gain nor a loss of weight was effected by eating hearty or passing up the calories. Basic or medium cereal breakfast of fruit, cereal, milk, bread and butter was found to be just as good as bacon and eggs. —*Ralph Cox*

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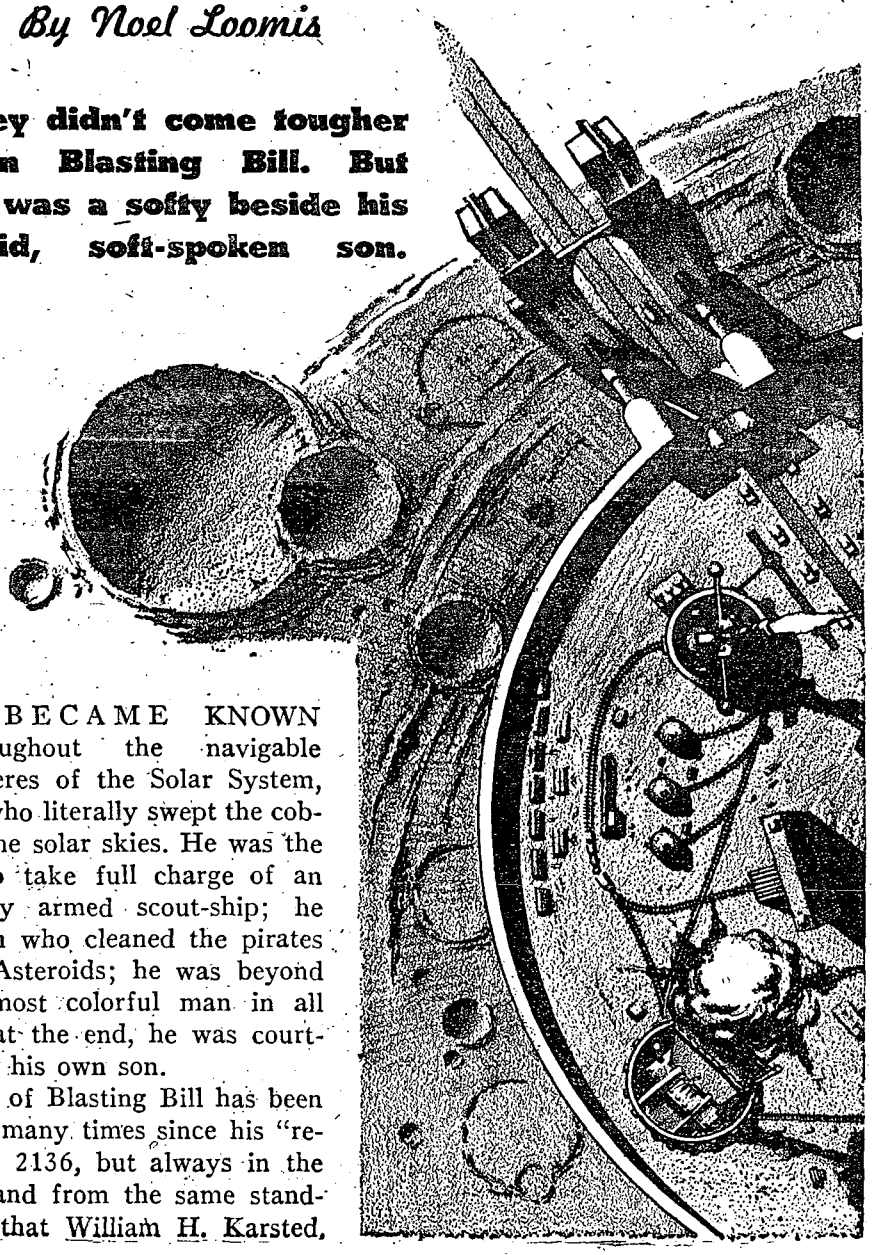
# TOUGH GUY

*By Noel Loomis*

**They didn't come tougher than Blasting Bill. But he was a softy beside his timid, soft-spoken son.**



HE BECAME KNOWN throughout the navigable spheres of the Solar System, as the man who literally swept the cobwebs from the solar skies. He was the first man to take full charge of an interplanetary armed scout-ship; he was the man who cleaned the pirates out of the Asteroids; he was beyond doubt the most colorful man in all space; but at the end, he was court-martialed by his own son.

The story of Blasting Bill has been told a good many times since his "retirement" in 2136, but always in the same style and from the same standpoint—i. e., that William H. Karsted,



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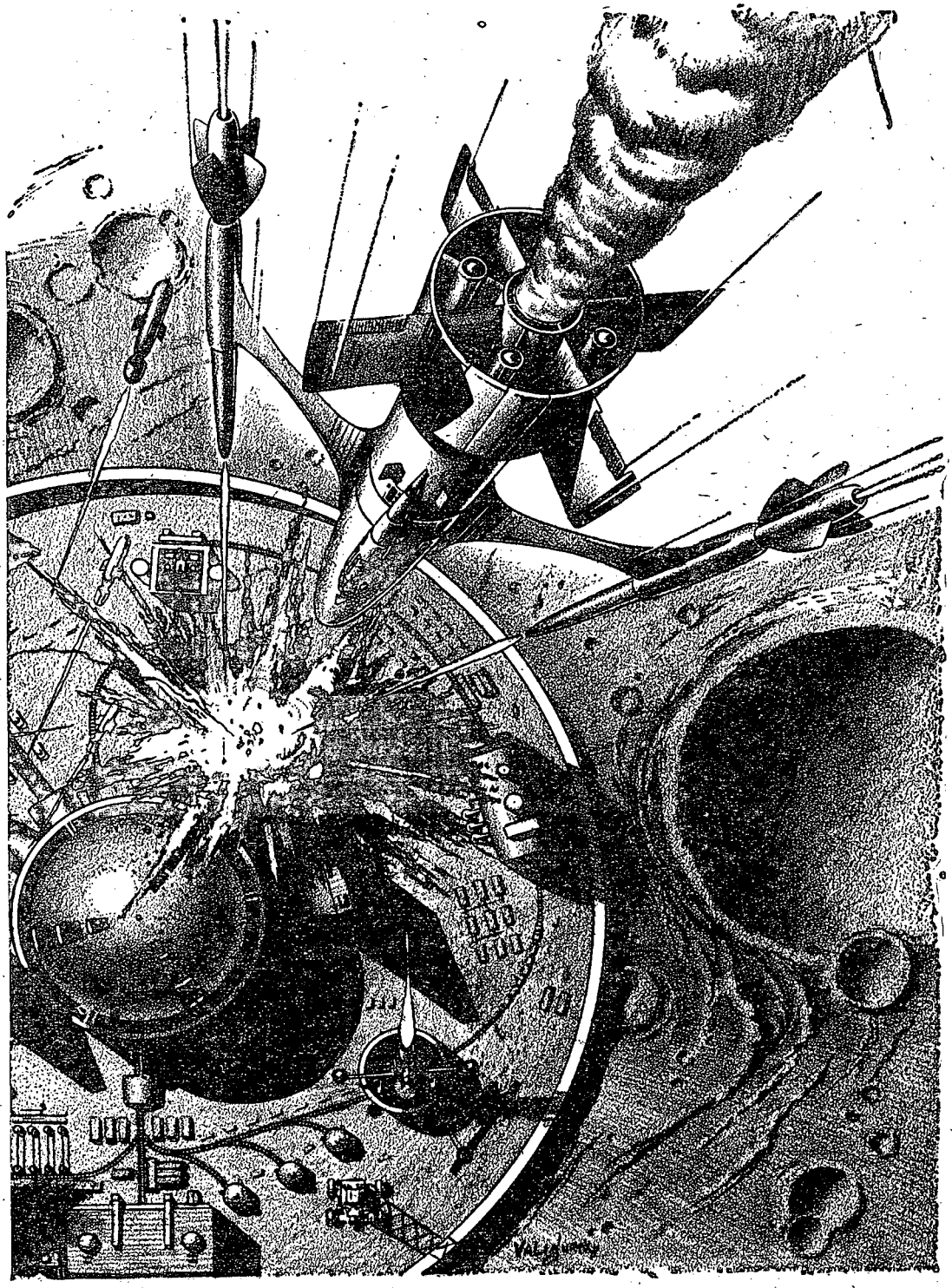



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Sr., was a two-fisted rocket-rammer of pioneer days in space, a swaggering, swearing, fighting man, the toughest, etc., etc.

Blasting Bill was tough, all right. He probably was the toughest man who ever lived, and the usual theme of his biographers is to the effect that he outlived his usefulness and became too tough for the Space Service that he built. It's the old story of individualism versus teamwork.

But there's another story that hasn't been told—the story of a man who was hungry for affection and went to extreme lengths to try to get it. It was ironic, too, for the person he wanted to impress was his son.

It started back in 2082 when the U. N. advertised for the "toughest men in space" to organize the newly formed Space Service. I was recruiting sergeant in the Brooklyn office at that time, and the morning after that announcement appeared in the evening telepaper, there was a waiting-line at the office. At the very front of the line was a great, barrel-chested, heavy-jawed, sandy-haired man with a black eye that covered half his face. When he came in he seemed to push everything before him with a wave of bounding energy.

"Your name?" I asked.

"William H. Karsted," he said in a booming voice.

"Home address."

"I'm from Brooklyn," he said proudly.

"Where in Brooklyn?"

He looked mildly astonished, and then puzzled. "Just Brooklyn," he said, and it sounded a little pathetic.

"What's the street address?" I was thinking he didn't sound like much of a prospect for the Space Service.

"Well—" he said. He looked at me a moment and then he decided to trust me. "Listen, Sarge, if it makes a difference, I'll get an address. Gimme the visiphone book."

I laid down the pencil. "Sorry, fellow, we can't take men with records."

THE MAN'S expression could change so fast and so completely that I thought for a moment his lugubrious face was leading to a cry. I was uncomfortable. What kind of a freak had I drawn, anyway? But he said, "I ain't been in stir, Sarge. Honest. It was—I just—oh, hell, I was raised in an orphan asylum and I was afraid—"

I picked up the pencil. "What address?"

He drew a deep breath of temporary relief. "Honest, Sarge, I forgot."

I said, "Fellow, you'll have to do better than that."

His eyes were like those of a man cornered. He said, "I run away when I was little. I never had no home. I grew up on the street."

"Where did you sleep?"

"Parks in the summer, hallways in winter." He shrugged.

"You must have had a time keeping away from the Welfare," I said sarcastically.

Then he grinned, and it would have melted a stone man on Pluto in the dead of winter. It was a grin that spread all over his face, from ear to ear. His face got a little pink, and his blue eyes, that had seemed on the defensive up to then, lighted up, and he just seemed to take me and everybody else in with him on his secret. He said in a husky half-whisper that could have been heard up in Times Square, "It wasn't easy, Sarge."

Under "address" I wrote the street number of the recruiting station. Then I looked at him. "That's a lovely

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mouse on your left eye."

He grinned again. "A couple of prize-fighters and a taxi-driver tried to push me out of my place in line." That's all he said.

WE TOOK him. His formal education was pretty spotty, but he had gone to night school and taken a laborious correspondence course in navigational math, and he could drive any sort of space-ship that could get into the air. When I went out to Rocket-Field and saw the pile of scrap he had pushed through the Asteroids for ten years hunting heavy ores, then I knew it was the force of his driving personality that we needed. His was the sort of vitality that almost seems to invade even metals and wood and make them do what the owner wills. What it will do to men is incredible.

The Space Service needed him. In fact, he was, though rough, still very much a jewel. At that time the Moon, of course, was well policed, but the Asteroids were a different story. There were several hundred, scattered all over the system from Venus to Uranus; their orbits were eccentric, their planes of rotation varied. And so the entire Belt—which is an obvious misnomer, although it still is used—was hardly more than a vast pirates' nest. The toughest characters on Earth had gone out to the Belt and entrenched themselves or lost themselves. Every pirate had a private planet from which he would make forays for ships, arms, valuable cargo, and women. Then he retreated to his base, and if a police ship was unlucky enough to find him, a good many times it would actually be out-gunned by the pirate base, for after Death-Ray Jones waylaid the heavy battle cruiser *Manhattan* on her maiden trip to Venus, he used her as a starting-point and decimated the U. S. fleet and sold all the armament he captured to other pirates at astronomical prices.

Then when the U. N. finally got around to doing something, the high brass figured it would take several thousand of the toughest men on Earth, most of whom would lose their lives, and billions in equipment. But mainly it would take men.

So Bill Karsted was our man. A man of power. We took him in. He was smart and willing. He applied himself to the paper work and before long he was a fair avigator. He knew engines and could make them do anything, though sometimes I still wonder if it wasn't mostly a product of his exuding enthusiasm that made an engine *want* to do what he wished.

Oddly enough, he worked hard on his speech, and before long he was hardly identifiable as a Brooklynite.

When the first U. N. fighter was commissioned, it was one of the early five-man boats, and any well-trained officer of today looking at it in the International Museum, will go away shaking his head. But Lieut. Karsted was very proud of it. He said to me—I had applied for duty on his ship—he said, "Sergeant, she's a beauty. In no time at all we'll have the Asteroids cleaned out, and then we can take it easy."

Nobody but Bill could have said that and made it sound earnest, for it was like setting out in a rowboat to clean the Pacific Ocean infested with sharks. Only when Bill said it, you had to believe it. And the way he started out, it looked as if he might put it over. If it hadn't been for the vast distances—

WE HAD one of the first regenerative power units, and Lieut. Karsted headed out for Sappho. His assignment was to clean out the headquarters of Death-Ray Jones, and I

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knew that meant we probably would not come back.

We located Death-Ray on Sappho, and while we circled, Bill calmly sent him notice to surrender. Death-Ray's answer was, "Come on down and talk it over, you soft-knuckled Brooklyn bum."

Bill took a tremendous breath. His face got redder than ever. He licked his space-chapped lips and looked at us. No doubt he had been called a lot of things in his hazardous life, but it was the first time anybody had said he was soft. He stood there for a moment, and his face began to look as if it would explode. Then he found his voice. "All hands at battle stations!" he roared in a voice that almost swelled the plates. "Prepare for landing! Full speed ahead. Blast awa-a-ay!" And as the little fighter jumped in her orbit at an acceleration of five G's, Bill muttered under his breath, "We'll see who's soft."

They let us land. That was to be expected, for no doubt they wanted our ship. We dropped down in front of Death-Ray's headquarters. We left the ship and walked across the smoking chromium surface to a big stone building, over which now hung a black flag with a jagged green streak running through it diagonally. Bill Karsted—Blasting Bill Karsted, I thought as I remembered his ringing order—looked like a giant in his space-suit and glastic bubble. The shaded right triangle of the U. N. Space Service was bold on his left shoulder. He strode up and hammered on the door with his armored fist.

There was no answer. He hammered again. Again no answer. He took a whistling breath of oxygen. It was a steel door and our hand-blasters might have some trouble getting through it. He took out his heat-projector. He had a regular arsenal at his belt. He aimed the heater at the black and green flag. It went up in flames. Then he ordered our pilot, "Turn the ship's stern this way and warm them up."

We stood at one side while the ship's exhaust poured a kilometer-thick solid stream of blue-green flame at the stone building. One minute of that was enough. Men in space-suits began to erupt from rear windows and doors. Bill watched without showing any feeling.

The pirates gathered. A big-shouldered, black-haired man in a space-suit strode up to Bill.

It didn't look good to me. The man had murder in his eye, and he was backed by twenty heavily armed men. *We* had four. But Bill spoke first. Above the roar of the ship's exhaust, I heard his voice in the communicator: "Are you in charge here?"

"I am Death-Ray Jones," said the big man, and his voice was metallic and deadly, "and you are destroying my administration building. Cut it off."

But Bill just looked at him. "You don't need an administration building any longer," he said calmly. "I arrest you and all your crew for piracy in space, by authority of the U. N. Space Service."

Death-Ray's right hand jumped for a blaster at his belt.

My throat suddenly felt so dry it hurt, but Bill didn't bat one of his sandy eyelashes. He swung. His armored fist clanged on Death-Ray's glastic helmet. Death-Ray was jarred. The man behind him went for a blaster and I burned a hole in his stomach with a heater.

Then Sappho exploded. Death-Ray's men began to draw. They should have cut us down the first round. But Bill was drawing too. He didn't back away.

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He didn't stand there. He waded into them, drawing and firing everything he had.

What air there was on Sappho was filled with the roar of atom-blasters, the sizzle of heaters, the sharp snicking of paralyzers, the shrill whistle of sonic-thorn vibrators. If it hadn't been for the new-type filters in our bubbles we would have been blinded by the yellow, red and white flashes of explosions. And all this against the steady roaring of blue-green flame from the ship.

ABRUPTLY it was over. The flashes ceased. The explosions—sharp, cracking, and deadly—ended. The black smoke began to lift, and Blasting Bill was the only man on his feet. He stood there among the littered pirates like a great, fire-singed, smoke-grimed giant. He looked around him and his arms began to drop to his sides. He looked back at us. Two of our crew were down—one with his head blown off, the other swelled up to twice normal size with an expansion dart in his abdomen. I had been grazed by a paralyzer but I wasn't hurt.

Death-Ray's administration building began to melt down. I got to my knees. Bill looked at me and the same grin that had been on his face when he told me about evading the Welfare, came back. He looked like a little boy when he said in the communicator, "Pretty good fight while it lasted, hey?"....

He was Blasting Bill after that, and when he was made commander and given a patrol boat, he was happy because it had lots of weapons on it. "I *like* to fight," he said. "It's what I was made for. I was made for the Space Service."

"What will you do," I asked, "when we get the Belt cleaned up and things cool down?"

"They won't cool down," he said confidently. "There'll always be a need for men—men who can stand on their two feet and outgun the other guy." And he believed it.

His fame spread. He scourged the Belt. He was made a captain and given a cruiser, and still he would load up his belt with arms and blast his ship smack into any pirate's nest he could find, with that ringing cry of "Blast awa-a-y." He cleaned out nest after nest. He lost men—lots of men—but he never took a backward step. He went in, firing, slugging, shooting. And always he was looking for Death-Ray Jones, who must have run away through the smoke on Sappho while his men died, for his body didn't turn up when Intelligence got through piecing the dead pirates back together.

Then one summer on leave back in Pennsylvania Bill lost a round. He fell for a farm-girl—not a glamor-girl, just a sweet kid who would have gotten under anybody's skin. It must have been something to see Blasting Bill Karsted ask her father if he could ask her to marry him....

Their boy was born in a couple of years, one day while Bill was on maneuver up near Venus. Bill was very proud. He treated all hands to Scotch, while he himself drank Jamaica rum straight.

HE DIDN'T see much of Bill, Jr., the next few years. The mother died when the boy was four, one year while Bill was leading a shakedown cruise under the sun. Bill, Jr., was raised by his grandmother. His father sent money and tried to see him at least once a year. The boy went through grade school. Bill saw him when he entered the ninth grade, but

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after that Bill was made admiral of the combined fleets and was pretty busy. He didn't see Bill, Jr., all through high school. The boy was graduated with honors. His father saw that he was enrolled in the Space School, but he didn't see the boy himself. The fleet's operations now were extensive, and an admiral's job didn't leave much time for visiting.

Bill, Jr., spent six years in Space School, and one day his father got a radio message that he would be graduated in April. The admiral threw a real brawl that night, coming in on his flagship from Mars. He drank Jamaica rum straight, and he toasted Bill, Jr., and he said, "Here's to the boy who will be the toughest man in space after I'm gone."

The next day Admiral Karsted didn't get to the hall in time for the opening ceremonies. He sat down at the back of the auditorium, and I was at his side, for I was his aide. They announced one boy after another, to receive various honors, and those fellows, as they walked across the stage, were men—broad-shouldered, brawny, space-tanned. Admiral Karsted began smiling to himself in anticipation.

Presently they called William H. Karsted, Jr., and Bill sat up. He stretched his thick neck to watch. Bill, Jr., came out, and Blasting Bill, his father, just sat there paralyzed. Bill, Jr., didn't walk hard on his heels like a booted man. He walked softly. He was slim. His face looked pink, as if he hadn't been shaving very many years. There was an odd sound from Blasting Bill's throat as he sank back. I didn't look at him. I kept my eyes front and tried to remember Bill, Jr.'s, honor rating of 96.2.

Blasting Bill left the hall before the ceremony was over. He sent a mumbled congratulatory message to his son, with word that he had been called away suddenly on fleet business. On the way back to the grand flagship, the U. N. R. S. *Ecliptic*, he said, "I always wanted to be a gentleman, but not *that* kind of a gentleman. He's soft!"

He did not see his son for some years. The executive officer of the *Ecliptic* asked Bill once how "Junior" was getting along, and was grounded at half pay for six months. No one else ever mentioned "Junior" to his father again.

It was during that period—2125 to 2135—that the U. N. fleet really opened up the Belt, and the admiral was always there on a big raid with his feet planted solidly on the ground and his hands full of smoking blasters. He'd come back with that little-boy grin on his face that exemplified sheer joy of combat, and he would say repeatedly, "This is the way I like it. If ever a time comes when it gets to be a big business messed up with a lot of red tape, I'll quit."

There was some heat, too, and plenty of talk. There were politicians who thought the grand admiral should stay at his desk, but Bill had so many notches on his own guns that he lost count. You would have had to check the logs for a good many years to determine how many pirates he had exterminated. He was not a man to temporize. He had the Belt declared out of bounds for all law-abiding citizens, and any person found in the Belt was considered running from the law. If he was running, he was a criminal.

That was Bill's logic—or part of it. The other part was that he didn't figure the Space Service had time to be running back to Earth every time we caught a freebooter. We'd have spent most of our time traveling. They passed regulations, but Bill found

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loopholes. "It's cheaper to burn an outlaw on the spot," he growled.

IN A FEW years, one of the line admirals sent in a recommendation that William H. Karsted, Jr., be promoted to captain. Bill called the admiral into the *Ecliptic*.

"Bill," said the admiral—all the admirals called him Bill—"you're too conscientious. Just because he's your son is no reason to hold him back."

"No, it isn't," Bill agreed, "but I've seen the kid. Sure he's my son and all that, but he isn't tough enough to be a captain in the Space Service."

Admiral Cavanaugh looked at him oddly. "So-o," he said, and the way he said it, shot glints into Bill's eyes. Cavanaugh saw that and straightened up stiffly. But he said his piece. "Just because a man doesn't act tough, it doesn't follow that he *isn't* tough. Toughness comes from the inside. It's a matter of integration of character." He paused. "At any rate, sir, I stand behind that recommendation. We need men like your son."

Bill allowed it. What else could he do? It occurred to him that maybe some people thought he was prejudiced against his own son, so he allowed it. But he watched Captain Karsted. If Junior should ever show a sign of weakness, he'd get bumped fast.

All this time, Death-Ray Jones was one murderer who evaded us. He caught a crippled cruiser and tossed fourteen hundred good men into space without suits, then took her heavy guns and tried to crash the ship itself at Lake Success. It was rumored that he had fortified an Asteroid, but no one knew which one.

More and more during this period Bill was submerged by desk-work, which left him less time for hand-to-hand combat. So it happened that, when Cavanaugh sent word from beyond the sun that he had pinpointed a fortification controlled by Slit-Eye Ferguson, one of the last of the big outlaws, Bill reluctantly ordered Cavanaugh to clean him out. "I want his head," said Bill.

"We'll get him, sir." Cavanaugh said confidently.

A month later we went out to help him, but we had hardly reached the sphere of action when Cavanaugh's flitter tied onto the *Ecliptic*, and the admiral came aboard, followed by a slit-eyed man whose face was blackened from a heat-ray. A slim young man in the sea-green uniform of the service and wearing the emblazoned sun of a captain's insignia had his left hand manacled to the prisoner's right.

"Captain Karsted," said Cavanaugh, "begs to report with a prisoner."

"What prisoner?" asked Bill.

"The pirate known as Slit-Eye Ferguson."

Bill's eyes widened. "Good. You got him." Then he frowned. "I didn't tell you to bring him here. I told you to bring his head."

"He was taken alive, sir."

Bill snorted. "Now," he said, "somebody will have to take him back to Earth. We need our men in space."

Cavanaugh said, "It's regulations, sir."

Bill sputtered. "Then they can change the regulations. We make our own."

"Sir," Cavanaugh offered, "the situation is not the same as it was before the century. Policing the Belt now is down to a system."

BILL GROWLED like an angry bear, and the stanchions shivered when he roared, "In space I'm still the admiral, and I say regulations won't kill pirates." He looked at the

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slim man in the captain's uniform and for an instant he didn't move. He remembered what Cavanaugh had said —"Captain Karsted"—and it was on his face as plain as Mars on the detector-plate that he was just realizing this was his son.

I watched him, almost fearfully. He swallowed. For an instant there was hunger in his eyes—a great, driving hunger, the kind that can drive you to do the opposite of the things you should do. I looked at his son. Bill, Jr.'s, face was still soft. The boy was slim. If he was tough he didn't show it the way his father did.

The boy straightened—though he was hardly a boy any more; he must have been thirty-five. A glow was in his eyes. It began to spread over his face, and I noticed then he was unshaven.

"I'm sorry for my appearance, sir," he said, and his voice sounded as if it almost had a catch in it. "You wanted him brought to you, sir, and I thought"—he swallowed—"I thought, sir, you'd like to see him."

Bill glared at him. I knew what was eating on him. The contrast between them was too much for Bill. Toughness to him meant roaring and fist-crashing—a front of dynamic belligerence. He said, "You have come the way you were when you took him?"

"Yes, sir," said Bill, Jr.

"What arms did you take him with?"

"My heat-gun, sir," the boy said hopefully.

"What else?"

"That's all, sir."

Bill drew a deep, whistling breath. He turned to Cavanaugh. "You let him go out there with a heat-gun? Not even a blaster? No pluto grenades? No sonic-needle? Not even a good old-fashioned pistol?"

"It was all I needed, sir," said Bill, Jr.

Blasting Bill exploded. "All you needed! You took a wholly unnecessary risk. This is space-fighting, not hide-and-seek. You violated regulations by going inadequately armed. You should be court-martialed. Blasting Bill Karsted carries *four* guns when he goes after a man. What do you think of that, Captain?" he asked scornfully.

He did not wait for an answer. He wheeled away and went to the bridge. He was a disappointed man. He was terribly disappointed, because he wanted affection so much and knew so little about how to accept it. His fetish for being tough kept the upper hand, and his emotional hunger came out as bitterness and hurt. The hurt was real, but it wasn't caused by what he pretended. "I should have sent him to dancing school," he said to me later, trying to maintain his front. I didn't answer.

Bill, Jr., was made a rear admiral after that, and in a very few years he was a full admiral, subordinate only to his father. His fellow officers elected him and Blasting Bill had little to say, but in the childishness of his inner hurt he avoided his son. Space is a good place for avoiding people.

Then came the day when a renegade gang from all the dens on the nine planets and their moons organized what was practically an outlaw world. They raided interplanetary shipping cautiously but almost at will. They had fast, heavily armed ships, and it was rumored that they had established factories and laboratories where they made their own equipment. In no time at all it was ominous, and Blasting Bill got orders from Lake Success to find their hideout and de-

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stroy it.

It was the first time they'd even spoken to him like that, and Bill took it seriously.

WE LOCATED their hideout on Melpomene. Reconnaisance showed they had a major fortress there—two-foot armor plate, backed by maybe twenty feet of concrete; late-type atomic projectors, dreadnaught-size sonic rays, sixteen-inch heat inducers. How they had gotten that stuff we didn't know, but there it was, and it was formidable. Caution was indicated.

The *Ecliptic* circled about a million miles away, and Bill held a staff meeting, with all admirals of the line present except his son, whose unit was assigned to guard duty. The council discussed tactics and weapon-strength. It looked tough. The fort was a big one and they had us out-gunned. Certainly their defenses were much heavier than ours. They had built the fortress in a deep pit of glass-hard volcanic rock that left only a small area open to attack, while they could cover half of their planet. We could take them, we thought, but how to do it with the least loss?

While the staff was huddled over the infra maps, an orderly came to Bill. "Radio for you, sir."

Bill looked up, surprised. Then he walked to the mike. "Admiral Karsted," he growled.

"Is dis de Brooklyn bum?" came a drawling voice.

I felt sorry for Bill then. He was a man of so many conflicting desires. He'd always been proud of being a tough egg from Brooklyn, but now—well, the intonation of the voice was an insult beyond all doubt.

Bill grabbed the mike. "This is Blasting Bill Karsted!" he roared, and the tubes rattled in their sockets.

The voice changed abruptly. It was cold, deadly, menacing. "This is Death-Ray Jones," it said, and every officer on the bridge froze for an instant. "I'm running your so-called outlaw nation. Aren't you coming in?"

Bill held his temper. "We'll come in when we're ready."

"I offer an armistice," said Death-Ray.

Bill's face got so purple it was reflected in the chrome plating of the mike. He sputtered, and finally words came out. "—abominable jackass!"

Death-Ray went on, "You can't take us without loss. You might not even take us at all."

"We'll take you in four hours."

"No." And we knew he was right. It would take days, maybe weeks. "There aren't enough of you. There aren't enough guts in your whole fleet to come in and fight it out."

By now it was apparent that Death-Ray was baiting Bill to do something precipitate, but Bill kept his voice level. "We don't operate that way any more," he said.

"What's the matter?" The insolent drawl came back. "Are you getting soft, Blasting Bill?"

It worked. Bill blew his top. He grabbed the microphone in both hands: He twisted it in two and hurled the pieces to the floor. He turned to his first officer with blazing eyes. "All hands on deck! Battle stations! Prepare all ordnance for action! Full speed ahead. Course for Melpomene. Blast awa-a-y!"

The flagship lurched violently. One admiral fell. Bill was braced on both feet. He turned to the paralyzed admirals. "Don't stand there like a bunch of idiots! Get to battle stations!" They scattered.

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WE WENT in. Went in as Blasting Bill Karsted had always gone in, guns blazing, projectors spitting, heat-rays whistling. It didn't take long. We attacked them full on. Bill stood behind our forward atomic rifle. The ship must have reached eighty thousand miles an hour in the run. They had something like ten minutes to receive us, and I will say they gave us the works. They got a heat-projector on our bow and even through the shields we were almost suffocated, but Bill ordered the course held straight. They wanted us to zig-zag, to throw off our aim, but Bill didn't fall for that. We could take it. I only hoped the plates wouldn't melt.

It must have been bad down there on Pallas. We were throwing everything in the book—and practically every inch of the flagship had some kind of weapon sticking through.

When we were only five hundred miles away, our plates were getting white-hot. The triggerman passed out and Bill took his place. The heat was terrific. The plates were almost ready to burst into flame. The *Ecliptic* shuddered as an atom shell exploded behind us. The warning siren indicated that the aft plates had sprung their seams.

The radar-sight held the cross-hairs on the target. At four hundred miles Bill fired three atomic shells at the hole where their heat-gun's snout showed. Then he ordered the course raised.

The first shell exploded on the outside of the fortress. The next one must have hit squarely in the hole, and the third one went in behind it and turned the fortress inside out.

The timing was perfect. The ship barely missed the ground, and we got through just under a million cubic yards of debris and before any of it came down again. It wouldn't come down very fast, on Melpomene. And fortunately most of it had gone straight up out of the pit.

Bill walked back up to the bridge. He peeled off his charred coat. "Well, gentlemen, we took them," he said with his little-boy grin. . . .

A week later, when Blasting Bill received notice to appear before a court-martial, he was dumbfounded, but he had his brass polished and his clothes brushed and his boots shined and he went. He wasn't very loud about it, but they'd see that Blasting Bill Karsted could take a court-martial too.

Court was held on his son's cruiser. There were seven on the court—including Bill, Jr., who was elected president. Blasting Bill's jaw muscles worked a little when he saw that, but he held his peace. Bill, Jr., looked at him impersonally. There was no guard. I was grateful for that.

THE CLERK read the charge—a long list of alleged acts of misconduct, adding up to unnecessary risk of lives and property in the destruction of the outlaw nation on Melpomene, and signed by all the admirals who had been on the *Ecliptic* at the time of the attack. None of these was on the court.

Bill listened half a day to the charges and I could see the contempt growing in his face. Finally he was asked if he had anything to say in his defense, and he made them a speech:

"Gentlemen, you are trying Blasting Bill Karsted, and I have this to say. While the witnesses against me"—he put all the contempt he could muster into his voice—"were dawdling over maps and figures, I went in and cleaned out the enemy. That's some-

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thing you can't do on paper. It takes *men* to fight; it takes men to conquer space. You don't do it with words. You do it with guns. I'm a man of action. I always have been. I am now. I grew up in the Space Service, and I haven't changed. I'm still Blasting Bill Karsted. If these sniveling morons want to court-martial me for that, then blast away, gentlemen. Blast away!"

Bill, Jr., watched him. The impersonal look was gone from the boy's eyes, and in its place was softness and perhaps regret and even tenderness.

Bill saw that and misread it. He drew a whistling breath and stood like a ramrod.

The boy looked down. "The prisoner will return at the same time tomorrow," he said, "for the verdict of the court."

We went in early the next day. We were ahead of time, and sat down in Bill, Jr.'s, private office. There was a picture of a girl on his desk. Bill looked at it and said gruffly, "That was his mother. I guess I wasn't much of a husband." He paused, and added, "Bill looks like her."

There were voices then, and we heard Bill, Jr.'s, soft, clear voice saying: "No, gentlemen, if he is to be sentenced I shall do it. In the first place, that is my duty, and the fact that he is my father does not change it. In the second place, I want to know that when sentence is pronounced on him, the one who does it will do it kindly, without ill-will. If he must be sentenced, it must be my privilege. I hope I can do it without faltering."

Blasting Bill looked queer. I got up and walked out quietly.

When I went back, they were ready. Bill's attorney appeared. The court came to order. Bill, Jr., stood up.

"This court finds the defendant guilty of unnecessarily risking lives and property of the service," he said in his soft voice, and he looked straight into his father's eyes. "The court has some comments. It is men like Admiral Karsted who cleared the sky lanes in the early days of rocket-flight. They did it largely by the strength of their hands, projected by force of arms. That was a necessary phase of interplanetary communication. But that phase has passed. The service is organized. It is no longer necessary to have good men rayed down single-handed. Also, it is no longer feasible. Lawbreakers themselves are highly organized. Therefore, with due regard to the past service of Admiral Karsted, this court orders him reduced to the rank of spaceman and retired on full pay. This we deem for the good of the service."

It had to be done, of course. The grand admiral couldn't flaunt regulations like that, or the Service would fall apart. So Blasting Bill grounded himself. He could have made a fortune by working for one of the rocket transport companies, but he said he had no particular use for the money.

IN NO TIME at all, however, he found that he couldn't live a normal life as Blasting Bill Karsted. The public wouldn't let him. To them he was a fabulous giant who stood astride sun and kept order in the solar system with far-reaching, mighty-sinewed arms.

In Bill's mind that did not contribute to the dignity of the service, so he disappeared.... He needed help in what he wanted to do, and my time was up anyway. I retired and went with him.

He bought a little farm in New Jersey under an assumed name. All

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mail had to go through Space Intelligence, and that department alone knew his actual address. He could have gone to the West Coast, but he chose New Jersey because he's living in the shadow of Rocket Field. He has a nice garden. We raise some very good tomatoes when the summer isn't too wet.

We've been here five years, and I've discovered something: because a man acts tough, it does not follow that he isn't tough.

A month ago there was a letter from "William H. Karsted, Jr., Grand Admiral of the Combined Space Fleets," addressed to his father in care of Space Intelligence. Bill, Jr., has two weeks' leave and would like to visit his father. He sounds very calm about it, but there is a plaintive note, too. He says, "I hope, sir, that you will be good enough to receive me."

Blasting Bill has read that letter many times. He sits on his front porch and watches the streaking fighters and the purple and green exhausts of lumbering cruisers that come in from far-distant planets and blast away on courses that will take them beyond the sun.

I said to him yesterday, "Sir, you haven't answered your son's letter."

Blasting Bill turned his eyes from the vapor trails in the high sky over Rocket Field. He looked at me. He hasn't shrunken with age. He's still big, big and somehow forward-moving in spite of the fact that he moves very little. He looked at me and his once-blazing blue eyes were soft—almost, I suspected, moist.

He said, "Why do you think I made that speech to the court that day after I was sentenced?... I knew I had it coming." He paused. "My son had just demonstrated more toughness than I would ever have. I know it hurt him, but he didn't show it. So could I let him think his dad was old and soft? Blasting Bill was known as the toughest man in the skies. It would have been a shock to my son if I hadn't been that way at the last." He fingered the letter. "Now," he said, "Blasting Bill is just a gardener with feet of mud and hands that pull pigweeds instead of blasters. Tomatoes!" He said savagely, and then softened abruptly. "If my son should come here he would be disillusioned and hurt. He remembers me as Blasting Bill. Let him keep his memories!" He paused. "No, I will not answer him." He said it easily, but the corners of his jaws were white as he looked out over Rocket Field and saw the grand admiral's flagship swoop in for a stern-end landing. "That's my son," he said softly. "There's a man that's *really* tough."

THE END

## LIFE ON VENUS

EARTH PROBABLY looks like a dead, dry planet viewed from other stars. This is because all the water vapor in her atmosphere is in the lowest atmospheric levels, within only seven miles of the surface.

So perhaps Venus has rich jungle life also. The mere fact that spectroscope studies showed indications of carbon dioxide but no trace of water vapor or oxygen, wouldn't necessarily prove that this planet was barren and lifeless. J. B. Sidgwick, in "The Heavens Above", says, regarding the evidence of no water or air, "It does not follow...that these gases do not occur in the upper atmosphere of Venus...they do occur in measurable quantities in the upper atmospheric regions which constitute the planet's visible surface. Sunlight only penetrates a comparatively short way into the fog blanket, and what the constitution of the lower levels may be we know not." —*L. A. Burt*

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# SCRAMBLED STARS

By

Faye Beslow

RECOMPUTATIONS are now in process which may make it possible to get the planet Earth properly oriented, and give us some idea of the direction in which the planet is moving.

The locations of about 5,000 standard stars, all prominent bodies, whose positions have long been accepted by sailors, are now going to be recalculated. The earlier locations were determined from observations extending back over the last hundred years. The new positions will be made from observations since 1900, of which there are almost 250,000 available.

According to Dr. H. R. Morgan of Yale University, many of the positions which were determined during the last century, when modern instruments were not available, contained errors almost a hundred times greater than any that are likely to be made today, although one must take into consideration the fact that the human fallibiliy factor can never be entirely eliminated.

Since there is no fixed point of reference, the problem of how to fix the position of the Solar System in space is a major one for astronomers. At this time, observations are being made to determine the precise direction of some of the nearer spiral nebulae, star systems which are comparable in size to the Milky Way Galaxy of which the sun is a part. Since they are so far distant, Dr. Morgan explains, they can be considered as fixed points of light in the heavens.

# TEST-TUBE TERRY

By Tom Taylor

THERE MAY be other contenders for the role of discoverer of the American continent besides Columbus and Vespucius, and the Vikings. According to Dr. Gordon Ekholm, associate curator of anthropology of the American Museum of Natural History, America was found by voyagers from Indonesia and Indochina at least 700 years before Columbus arrived on the scene.

Dr. Ekholm bases his opinion on various factors, among them the fact that as far back as 400 A.D. voyages were being made to Indonesia and Indochina from India, in ships which were able to stay out of sight of land for at least two months. Also, many of the relics in Mexico and Central America which date from 700 A.D. show marks of the culture of southeastern Asia. There are columns and balustrades found in Mexico, with a serpent motif, which are said to be almost identical with some found in Java!

# COMPETITION FOR COLUMBUS

By

Alice Kent Hieatt

THE SCIENCE-FICTIONIST'S dream of made-to-order test-tube babies isn't as far-fetched as it sounds, perhaps. According to Dr. Ralph Gerard, a University of Chicago physiologist, it is quite possible that scientists of the future will be able to combine the egg and sperm of selected parents and segregate the combination in a test tube, then transfer the embryo to the womb of a foster mother while it grows to its full *nine-month maturity.*

Such biologically select babies would of course create problems: should the parents be uniform in physical appearance, have the same mental capacities, and so on? A world of eventually identical inhabitants wouldn't be the most exciting, either.

But so far this prospect is still in the far future—still a dream of the imagination. If anything like it does develop, enough biological research will have been accomplished to have ironed out many of the sociological problems that arose.

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# THE HOLLOW WORLD

*By Harry Fletcher*

**Come into this hollow world. Here, you are king. Herein, all things are created for you. All power, all glory, all happiness. The price you pay? We'll go into that later.**

THINGS might still be the same if I hadn't met George Durwell at the Smithson bar. We weren't exactly friends, but I had done him a couple of favors and he'd returned them, so there was good will between us. What loosened up my troubles, besides five Manhattans and assorted chasers, was the fact that I hadn't seen him for over three years. Since before the big change in my life.

"Here's to memory!" he said, lifting his.

I couldn't drink to that, but how could he know?

"To things in general," I countered. "And to hell with them."

He looked at me as queerly as he had a right to, but put his down. So did I.

"Speaking of things," he said, "how are they with you?"

"Wonderful. Just w o n d e r f u l. Couldn't be better."

He got it—the bitterness I couldn't keep out, or didn't care to keep out. Of course he misconstrued it.

"We've got another kid now," he tried a new tack. "A boy. I don't suppose you—"

I could remember the talk, back in the old days. It was no secret then that Karen wasn't having any, that we'd been on the brink of going over the divorce mill because of it. So I surprised him.

"Two," I said. "A boy and a girl. Karen's crazy about them."

He congratulated me, meaning it. I ordered two more drinks.



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"I don't get as much time with mine as I'd like. Sometimes they get on my nerves, but you sure miss them if you're away as much as I am."

"Let's get it straight," I told him. "I love them too. I love Karen. She's wonderful. The kids are wonderful. They're everything I could possibly imagine...." And of course the bitterness crept in again, and he guessed wrong once more.

"How's your health, Steve? That old trouble of yours cleared up? Thyroid, wasn't it?"

With George it wasn't just nosiness. I remembered him as a guy who could feel bad about somebody else's troubles. Sometimes he put his foot in his mouth, but he always meant well.

"My thyroid is perfect. I've had three physical checkups in the past year, and three doctors have told me I'm as good as they've ever seen—got the physique of a tough kid, one of them said. There isn't a thing wrong with me, George. Except the important part they can't see."

He sipped his drink in confusion. Then he fumbled an apology.

"Sorry, Steve. I'm asking too many fool questions. Let's talk about something else. You name it."

It was then I made up my mind. I had to tell somebody, or go nuts, if that was possible. Probably it wasn't. So I'd tell George, although the way things were I might as well talk to a mirror.

"I'll name it," I said. "Me."

Of course I couldn't go wrong. Up to a point, everything would go just as I wanted it to. That was the pattern of things. George Durwell couldn't possibly do me wrong. Not he, or anybody.

HE LOOKED surprised again, but followed me to a table. I didn't want any bartender's ears flapping over what I had to say. Not that it would have mattered, of course.

"Tell me," I ordered him, "all about me that you remember. Especially my troubles."

He hedged and fumbled, but finally saw I meant it. "Well, your health wasn't good. Thyroid, your friends said. But there were some rumors—"

"That I was drinking myself dead. I was. Go on."

"Your factory was failing. A run of hard luck, some big contracts cancelled. Not really your fault."

"It didn't help to come in drunk at four in the afternoon with my creditors waiting. Only I don't remember which came first, the drinking or the factory going to pot."

George squirmed. "But you got on your feet again, I heard. Even though the plant—"

"—went blooey. Sure, I failed. Didn't save a Truman dollar out of it. And I stayed in an alcoholic tailspin. You didn't mention Karen, so I'll tell that part. We were falling out of love fast. The one thing that might have saved us—kids—she wouldn't hear of. I was a good, all-around, hundred-per-cent failure. Business shot, marriage on the rocks, health slipping, and unable to focus on anything through the bottom of a glass. Steve Saunders, flop."

Embarrassed, George toyed elaborately with his glass. For a moment I felt sorry for him, before I remembered. Why should I feel sorry for him? Yet, for a moment, I had doubts about telling him the rest.

"It's a long story," I wound up. "Let's just say it's all changed. I'm doing fine now. Writing television plays, up in the top brackets. My net income is pretty nearly what the plant's gross used to be. So I'm okay. What about you?"

Maybe it was the drinks, or my

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spilling over as I had. Anyway, it was George's turn to loosen up, and he did. His story sounded like an echo of my own old nightmare. Business troubles. A nagging heart condition. His wife was sticking by him, but his eldest son's name was soaking into police blotters bit by bit. Any time now he might do something that couldn't be erased. And the more George talked, the more I wondered. In a sense, his troubles were my fault. Maybe I owed him a choice. But would he realize the price of escape? And then again, why should I care? He wasn't real, any more than Karen, or the kids, or the sponsors who paid me for my scripts.

"I'd tell him, just to see how it felt.

"You want to change all that?" I asked him suddenly.

He was stopped for a moment. "Of course," he mumbled finally, as if ashamed of it.

"Then listen. This is the gimmick, the turning point. Nothing need ever go wrong with you again. I mean that, but it's not as Utopian as it sounds. We'll come to the price later on. Just listen."

THE BANKRUPTCY notice was in the paper (I told George) when Karen left me. For good, it seemed. And while I stood there reading her farewell note, trying to remember whether it was the Scotch or my old service revolver I wanted next, I had a caller. I almost didn't answer the door. But because I did I'm here now, rich, successful, happily married, with everything in the universe to make me happy. I'm not, but we'll come to that....

So I answered the bell. It was a private detective who said he'd been checking on me and knew I was in trouble. He said he represented a man who made a business of helping people out of trouble. If I wasn't going to kill myself, it might be worth my while to see this man.

The detective was pretty good. I went, expecting nothing, not much caring if it was a racket. I had nothing but my life to lose, and didn't care about that. And you know who it was? Andrew Nixon.

"Our old math professor at Fordhill?" George put in. "But he'd been canned, hadn't he?"

He was kicked off the faculty for his unorthodox theories (I resumed). Not because he held them, but because of the feuds he was forever beginning over them. You remember Dunne, the Englishman who developed the theory of serial time? Nixon took him as a prophet, built on his work, and pyramided Dunne's fantasies. The Board got tired of it eventually, and threw Nixon out. I'd never given him a second thought until the detective took me to see him.

In a mansion just outside town, a Hollywood butler showed me to Nixon's library. A few minutes later Nixon was sitting across from me, pinning me into my chair with those cold, calculating eyes of his. Gray they were, and sharp as ever—but different too. I didn't appreciate the difference right off.

Nixon didn't beat about the bush. He told me he had hired the detective to find a man down on his luck, a desperate man—but an intelligent one. I admitted to fitting the first part of the description.

"You know I was ousted from the University," Nixon said. "I was an utter failure myself, from any ordinary standpoint. I had many enemies and no friends. My work brought me only ridicule. As you might know if you moved in academic circles, or might guess from your observation of this house, all this has changed."

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I could take that on faith for the moment, so I nodded.

"The studies for which I was laughed at brought me to a discovery. It is a formula for success beyond your wildest dreams, embracing every aspect of your affairs. If you're dying, it will make you well. If poor, rich. If unloved, you can have your choice of women. Are you interested?"

I told him that if such a thing existed, I wanted it on any terms. He held up a well-manicured hand.

"There is a price, and a high one. So let us say that you will accept or decline after you know everything. I don't want any money from you, I literally have all I can use, and it did not come from luring unhappy men here and selling them fantasies. I am mathematical consultant for a dozen big industrial houses. This brings me the respect for my abilities I have always craved, and very handsome fees besides. I have a beautiful wife, considerably younger than myself, who is devoted to me. Furthermore, my health is excellent, better than many a far younger man's—"

"Congratulations," I interrupted him. "So what do you want?"

"I'm coming to that. But if at any time you lose interest, you have only to get up and walk out." He meant it, too. I stayed.

"You surely know a little of Dunne's theories. In layman's language, if time as we know it flows on, it must have a rate of flow. But to measure rate, another time is necessary. Again, *its* rate of flow calls for a third time, and so forth. On that crude fundament I have built for fifteen years."

I WAS BEGINNING to be disappointed—and bored. "What's this got to do with real life?" I asked. "Specifically, with mine?"

There was something about his smile I didn't like. It suggested he was beginning to enjoy himself at my expense. Again he raised a hand.

"Thus, there must be an infinity of serial times. How they are related to the real world became my chief line of study. The time our clocks measure, which Dunne called Time One, might by my own calculations be anywhere in the infinite series. But my first milestone was the discovery that Time One—clock time—is not the same for all individuals. Although at this moment you and I can tell time by the same clock on the wall, a split second later what you know as clock time may shift for me to Time Two or Time Three, athough the clock will look no different. And our experiences—the outer world—will vary for us accordingly."

A bit annoyed to find myself getting interested, I listened.

"Crudely, you might say human consciousness follows a railroad track with an infinite number of switches along it. I learned that those switches can be thrown. They are being thrown all the time, by illness, shock, trauma, free will, or even what cults have called 'holding the thought'. But to individual consciousness the track seems straight. It is unaware that it ever had a choice of paths.

"And then came a greater discovery—that despite appearances, despite accident, fate, or whatever fictions mortals may invent, it is they who throw the switches for themselves. The illness, trauma, or shock are milestones at which consciousness tends to jump the track; they are phenomena, not cause. We pick our own route, blaming an engineer who's not in the cab, running by signals we never see."

He sat back, pausing, and looked hard at me with those gray gimlet eyes of his. "I need a man willing to think. Do you see it?"

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("I'm afraid I don't—not clearly," said George as I paused and looked the question at him.)

Keep thinking about it (I told him). I did, while Nixon kept on talking. And suddenly something clicked.

"Look here," I interrupted him. "If each of us throws these time switches for himself, then you can go your way and I can go mine. There are as many world-experiences as there are individuals."

He nodded, pleased. "Or, as the Chinese say, Destiny is fan-shaped. In one of these possible universes, you shot yourself before my detective arrived. Your widow is buying mourning. In another, you walked out of here before I came this far in my little lecture. In a third, in my own universe, you are listening to me. In this time track, you will stay and accept what I offer."

"What do you mean, your universe? If I stay, it's mine too."

HE SHOOK his head. "The you that I conceive of will stay, but I have no way of knowing whether the you that you are aware of will go or stay, and I don't care. If you were to get up and leave this instant, you would simply have elected another track than mine. But mine is my own "best of all possible worlds", as Voltaire's Candida put it, and in it you will stay to please me. Whether you choose the same track for a brief time is up to you. I can't and needn't compel you."

"But regardless of what I do, I can't cross you?"

He nodded. "You can in your track, but not in mine. In my pattern of events, you will not budge from that chair until I am done. Why? Because I've chosen a time track in which my will is supreme, in which I never fail. The track in which you once knew me as a failure, as a discredited, disgruntled teacher, I have abandoned. Just so you can abandon the one in which you have failed."

"What's the price?"

His eyes veiled something. "You'll think it cheap when I tell you. It isn't, but you won't believe that. I hope not, because if you fully realize the cost, you'll refuse." He laughed. "I forget myself. You won't refuse."

"The price!" I croaked.

"Boredom."

I almost laughed in his face. I did laugh, inside, the way you do when something you badly want is offered at half what it's worth.

"I can see you think it's cheap," he said. "Good. You accept?"

"God, yes. What do I have to do?"

"Do? You've done it."

"Done what?"

"Selected your most advantageous time track. Exercised what mortal man never before knew how to use—true free will. You see, once awareness realizes its power of choice, it can no more deviate from its ideal path than we can help breathing. Not even if it wants to."

A spasm had passed over his face, a shadow of pain over those cold gray eyes, and something else too. For a moment, I thought it was a wild sort of triumph.

"But you haven't told me anything of the mathematics involved," I objected.

The gray eyes turned scornful. "There aren't four men in the world who could understand my equations. Luckily, you don't have to. I discovered the facts mathematically, but you needn't be a mathematician to be a man. The truth is native to consciousness, not to mathematics, which is only a tool."

I felt oddly disappointed. "There must be more to it than that."

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"Take my word for it, there isn't. You've grasped the principle, chosen to use it, and agreed to pay the price. Sounds like an old-fashioned bargain with the devil, doesn't it?"

I didn't care for that witticism, although I didn't dream then how near the truth it was.

"Before our tracks diverge again," he said, "a toast to boredom!"

We drank it. And then my doubts rushed back.

"It's been an interesting visit," I said. "You offered me the sky and I accepted. We drink on it, and I leave. Maybe I'll get a good laugh out of all this some day."

He looked at me oddly. "Oh, no, you'll not laugh." A grimace as of pain swept over his face. "You think nothing has changed, but I can already assure you it has. You feel nothing. I have no laboratory with operating tables or chairs to strap you in, no skull electrodes or Jacobs ladders up which sparks prance. No pseudoscientific trappings. So you think nothing has been done. But wait and see. Meanwhile, to give you hope..."

He opened a drawer, took out a checkbook, and scribbled in it. Then he passed me the check. It was postdated one week, and was for ten thousand dollars.

"If you think I am a liar then, cash the check. You'll find it's good. On the other hand, if you find I told the truth, if you begin to realize your own inevitable success in all things—"

"What then?" I asked.

"You won't need the money, but neither will I. Because in that case," and again that flicker of triumph flashed over the cold eyes, "I shall be dead."

GEORGE laughed in a strained way. "Poor old Nixon! As a matter of fact, he did die a few years back, didn't he?"

"As a matter of fact," I said, "he died two days after I saw him."

George didn't say a thing, and I saw he wouldn't.

"When I got back to my place that afternoon, Karen had returned. Her brother had come to town and heard of our troubles. He's an executive on a major network, and told Karen there was an upper-bracket opening I could bluff myself into, with his help. I did, and it turned out I wasn't bluffing. I've got the job still, but in addition I learned television was made for me and the dramatic writing I always wanted to do. Karen discovered she was crazy about me and wanted kids too. My old creditors fight to get me to their parties. They'd give me the factory back, if I wanted it, and I'd make a thumping success of it if they did."

"And Nixon's check?" George asked.

"It was good. But his health wasn't. Not in my time track, at least. I'd give anything you can name to know whether it held good in his own or not...."

We were both strangely sober, considering the amount of alcohol we'd had. Ever since the change, liquor couldn't hurt me.

"You said something," George floundered, "about me—my own affairs."

I hated myself briefly. But was I my brother's keeper? Or could it matter to George? Was it George here at the table with me, or just something I saw, heard, and named George, but that didn't know itself in my best-of-all-possible time tracks at all? Even so, I'd play fair.

"I'm offering you exactly what Nixon offered me. But wait a bit. Nixon lied about the price. He lied like the devil. Maybe he was the devil. Maybe the legendary stories of bargains with Satan, who offers his victims the whole

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world, are just such deals as I made with Nixon. But I'm not the devil, so I'll tell you the price. I think I need another drink first."

George could hardly wait for me to swallow it.

"The thing Nixon's bargain leaves out, makes impossible, is an intangible. Peace of mind, happiness, spiritual satisfaction—name it what you like. It was about Karen I felt the first lack. She adores me. She's utterly devoted and completely true to me and always will be. Believe me, I'm certain. She is absolutely everything I could dream of or desire in a woman.

"Except that she isn't real."

It hit George despite the drinks, his desperate hope, and all.

"That's it—that's Hell. And Nixon hid it. I read Dunne hard afterwards. There's a lovely phrase in one of his books: '. . . a heaven of private pleasure, and a hell of utter loneliness,' I think it goes. That's it. Shall I go further?"

GEORGE just sat open-mouthed, so I went on: "With an infinite number of Time Ones, which is real? To me, the one I follow. But you may be on another in which you took me home an hour ago, dead drunk. That one is real to you. If that's so, who is the George Durwell sitting here with me? A figment. Something in my consciousness, to whom any resemblance to anybody real is coincidental. You're all in my mind. You're a fine fellow and you'll accept my offer, because that's what I want and good old George can't refuse me anything in my favorite time track. But George isn't real. Nor is Karen, nor the kids, nor my bank account, and if I have a God where is He?"

"Steve, old man, let's go home. You're sick."

"I have the constitution of a horse, my doctors assure me. But they'd have to, being my private property. They couldn't say otherwise."

"Then see a good psychiatrist, Steve."

I laughed, carefully, to show I wasn't drunk. "I've used up two of them. The third agrees with the others that I'm sensitive, highly strung, but sound as can be. Just as I'd like myself to be, you see. Oh no, you don't break the charm that way."

"Come on, let's go home." He was getting worried now.

"Maybe it can't be broken. But I'll tell you a secret, George. Something I wouldn't tell you if I thought you were real."

He listened. What else could he do?

"Nixon was trying to break it. I believe he thought he could get out of it by passing on the secret, just as I'm trying to do. You see, once you know what it's all about, that it's a hollow world with nothing in it but yourself —you can't stand that. You can't escape it by going insane. The pattern won't permit that. But Nixon must have worked it out mathematically, and he hoped to escape by passing on the bargain. Maybe that won't work either. Nixon died in my time track. I have no proof that he died in his, or that he could."

We looked at each other, cold sber, knowing this was the moment of reckoning.

"You mean this, all of it, don't you?" George asked in a small voice.

I didn't have to answer. He knew.

"After all," he said. "There's no reason to think the wrong track—the one in which you're a failure—is any more real than the successful one."

He was selling himself. Why should I point out that I *knew* my world was hollow, while he could only suspect that his was.

"Guess I'm crazy," he laughed

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nervously. "Or you'll think I am. But I've a good mind to take you up."

"It's your life," I said.

"I accept," he said hastily.

"You've done it," I told him, and all at once felt different.

THIS ACCOUNT is dated and attached to my will. Within a month, if then living, I'll reclaim and destroy it. But if the will is probated before that time, this full account is to be published, in the form of fiction if in no other way.

If it is, you'll know I escaped my hollow world—in your Time One.

But somewhere in the infinity of Times there is one in which I have not escaped, and the charm is unbroken.

That one may still be mine.

*Stephen Saunders*

THE END

# FISHING WITH ELECTRONS

By Merritt Linn

ECONOMISTS have often predicted that the one great untapped source of wealth, inexhaustible and rich beyond imagination, is the sea. It is said that, if the population of the world continues expanding at its present rate, eventually men are going to have to look to the oceans for food. In some Asiatic countries, notably Japan, much ocean plant—varieties of seaweed—is consumed.

But the absolutely inexhaustible food source in the sea is, of course, fish. True, fishing banks seem to become exhausted when too extensively worked, but this is really a matter of fish not appearing as a result of not-yet-understood natural factors. There are plenty of fish in the sea. They only need to be caught.

Two developments are going to make fishing really big industry. One is the famous supersonic "sort of radar" technique of locating schools of fish. This technique, an outgrowth of submarine detection with sonic gadgetry, is most promising, and is being used already on a practical scale. It is possible, literally, to sweep the sea bottoms and thus to locate vast shoals of fish.

But location isn't the only problem, and this is where the second device comes in. It is the new electric fishnet, an ingenious electrical trap for harvesting fish in quantity. Experiments have shown that schools of fish, when subjected to electric fields, frequently lose their normal reactions to danger. When a positive and a negative electric pole are inserted in water, an electric field is of course set up. This electric field can extend, with varying intensities, over wide areas and large volumes of water. Fish caught in the field are fair prey for mechanical net-trapping. It is reminiscent of electric stunning—somewhat like that practiced by the eel, but not so intensive. And not all of the method is dependent upon sheer stunning. In fact, the greater part is a matter of simply disorienting the fish so that they are confused and lose their common reaction to danger—flight. In this way they are made easy prey for the fishermen.

It is rarely realized how mechanized modern large-scale fishing has become. From "a dory on the Grand Banks" to a modern electric floating fish factory with built-in freezing apparatus is a big step. The new potentialities of electric and sonic trapping make deep-sea fishing a likely source of tremendous new food supplies. There is only so much land for farming and agriculture, but the seas are so vast that, for all practical purposes, their food-wealth is limitless. The future of eating looks a lot brighter!

Scientists are also working on a means of processing fish-protein so that it simulates regular meat-protein, and is thus more appetizing to more people. The nutritional values of fish are just as great as are those of meat, but people have generally preferred the latter. Perhaps, with chemical and physical treatment, a synthetic "meat-from-fish" dish will make its appearance very soon.

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# SOAP DOESN'T GET IT CLEAN

*By June Lurie*

TODAY'S HOUSEKEEPER is a sucker for just about every kind of soap and bleach available, to help her in her fight against dirt. Then, after the item has been scrubbed, she goes on the assumption that it is as clean as it looks. But this is usually not the case.

Dr. G. M. Ridenour, of the National Sanitation Foundation, and his associates have been engaged in research to determine the efficiency of various washing processes, and to that end have been using different methods to locate dirt which the eyes cannot see.

Their latest findings are that radioactivity will bring forth on any surface, in any material, any vestige of hidden dirt. This doesn't make it any easier for the laundress, or the dishwasher, to get the dirt off. But it does permit finding out whether all the dirt, or some specific percentage of it, has been removed by washing.

Once they have been cleaned, the soiled clothes or dishes are exposed to X-ray film. The dirt which was unremoved by washing leaves its evidence on the film, even though it is invisible to the naked eye. Thus, Dr. Ridenour is able to determine the quantity of the dirt, and its distribution.

This X-ray-film method is 98 percent accurate—and will play a big role in the manufacture of various soaps and machines, for, with it, manufacturers and consumers will be able to learn which washing process and which detergent has the greatest effect on which materials.

# MAN'S LAST CHANCE

## By Salem Lane

MAN SHOULD make the most of the life given his species because, according to Dr. G. W. Beadle of the California Institute of Technology, who spoke at a recent symposium on evolution, the combination of organic compounds uniting to produce life as we know it will probably never occur again.

Life on earth probably started spontaneously billions of years ago: a chemical union took place by chance when organic compounds floating in prehistoric seas united. The process cannot be repeated, since there are no longer masses of organic compounds from which such life may have sprung.

According to Dr. Beadle, it could have taken millions of years for the first living molecule to duplicate itself, but a chance combination of compounds must have acquired a new property—the ability to duplicate itself and to undergo mutation. And this was the beginning of life as we know it.

Greater even than the evolution from simple amoeba to man was the very first development of life itself. Dr. Beadle also believes that viruses are not only comparable to the first form of life, but probably constitute also the final stage of the degeneration of higher forms. While living things have been developing into the increasingly complex forms with which we are familiar, it seems that evolution has been going on in the opposite direction too.

# HOME IS THE HUNTER

*Jon Barry*

DR. HELMUT DE TERRA has discovered skeletons on this continent which may well be over 12,000 years old. Several years back, he found the remains of human skeletons in a small village not far from Mexico City. Now, stone-hunting weapons have been found near the bones of a mammoth. Two projectile points were found between the ribs of a mammoth, and nearby were an obsidian knife and a stone scraper.

Probably it was customary for prehistoric hunters to drive the animals into the swamp, where they were unable to extricate themselves, and where it was easy to kill them with bow and arrow. The knife and scraper found near the skeleton of the mammoth were probably used to remove its meat.

Mammoth bones have also been dug up in New Mexico and Colorado, but this is the first time human remains have been found in this vicinity. It is now a certainty that prehistoric man hunted mammoth on this continent.

According to Dr. de Terra, archaeologists can now determine with a great deal of accuracy when man first appeared on this continent. For this, he uses the method of measuring the radioactivity of carbon 14. This particular isotope spends half of its radioactivity in 5,000 years. Since carbon is present in all organic material, it's easy enough to determine the ages of ancient and prehistoric organic remains by measuring the radioactivity of any carbon 14 that they may contain.



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# I'LL SEE YOU IN MY DREAMS

*By Rog Phillips*

**It's all right to dream, but when you start having the same dream as your wife, it can prove very embarrassing.**

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THE ALARM went off. I groped for the clock and shut off the noise. Then I remembered the dream, just as I was getting the light turned on. I turned to Nancy. "I had a dream last—"

I stopped. She stopped. She had been saying the same thing.

"We were in a house," I said quickly. But we seemed to be connected to the same program. She had said it too, and fast, so as to get it out before I could.

"I had a dream," I began again, firmly. "We were in a house. We were going from room to room. It was, well, a kind of big house. Lots of rooms. Wallpaper on the walls. I don't remember seeing it from the outside, but I seem to know it was brick with a mansard roof. You know, the kind that's sort of flat, then goes into steep sides, with the windows of the third floor projecting from them."

She didn't say anything for a minute. Then, "But John, that was the same kind of house I dreamed we were in."

"Just coincidence."

"M-maybe." She frowned in thought.



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"I just remembered something," she said. "Something that happened in the bedroom with the four-poster bed. You picked up a powder box to look at it, and—" She was looking at me now, her eyes wide.

"I dropped it and it broke," I said.

She nodded slowly.

"The question is," I said after a long silence, "where is this house we were in?"

"I don't know." Nancy's voice was almost inaudible.

I didn't know either. After another silence I got out of bed.

During the next two days, though we didn't talk about our joint dream, we caught each other thinking about it. One or the other of us would be staring into space, scowling. The other would notice it. It bothered us.

Then, at work one day, it came to me where the house was. I could hardly wait until five o'clock and quitting time to rush home and tell Nancy.

She wasn't there. A note said, "John, I know where the house is. I've gone to make sure. Will be home shortly. Love, Nancy."

I didn't hesitate. The house was out on the old mill road where it curves around a hill. That's on the other side of town. I cut over and took the blacktop to avoid downtown traffic, and in twenty minutes I was going into the curve.

Sure enough, Nancy's car was there just off the highway. I pulled up behind it, then looked around to see if I could catch sight of her. I did. Immediately.

She was standing there, her wide-brimmed hat hanging loosely in her hand, looking at the charred remains of what had been the house. I went up and stood beside her, and though she knew I was there she didn't look around at me at all.

"I wonder when it burned down?" I asked.

But I knew. And Nancy knew.

It had been three nights ago. I would have staked my life on it.

A WEEK later we were at a party and I told them about it at the dinner table. Everyone agreed that it must be one of those things. Like the sea captain's wife who wakes up in the middle of the night convinced she'd just seen her husband—and learns later his ship went down at that very moment. Somebody suggested we write it up and send it in to one of those magazines like FATE or STRANGE that pay good money for unusual experiences.

We never got around to doing that, though. And after we'd told it a couple more times it became like something you hear about instead of something that actually happened to us.

Then came the night we went to the city. When we do that we leave the car parked near the station and take the interurban train. Coming back it was loaded and Nancy and I had to stand.

I'd bought the morning paper and was trying to read it and hang onto the strap. Something kept bothering me, and finally I got the thought that someone was reading my mind.

"Okay," I thought, "so it's irrational. But maybe just for the hell of it I can find out who it is."

I didn't really believe it. But just to play along with it I kind of studied the other passengers from underneath my eyebrows. Almost immediately I became certain that if anyone was reading my mind, it was a woman seated not far away.

She was about forty, rather plump without being fat. She wasn't looking at me, either. Her hands were crossed on her lap and she was staring across

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the aisle with a faraway look and a half smile.

"Okay," I thought. "So you're reading my mind. But how can I know for sure?" I studied her and got an idea. "I'll tell you what you do," I thought. "Uncross your hands and cross them the other way."

I repeated that thought several times, then waited.

She continued staring across the aisle at nothing, and smiling. Then she uncrossed her hands and stretched her arms in a perfectly natural motion. Then she took her eyes off the scenery outside the other side of the car and looked down at her hands, and smiled, and quite deliberately crossed them the other way.

She still didn't look at me.

I frowned, trying to decide whether it had been coincidence or not. I had an empty feeling that it was coincidence. But if it were, it was almost impossible coincidence.

I wanted to talk to her, but how could I? I could just see myself tipping my hat politely and saying, "Pardon me, lady, but were you just reading my mind?" I could just see myself. Especially when the guy sitting next to her was bigger than I am and twice as tough-looking, and probably her husband.

So I said nothing and did nothing. Nancy and I got to sit down at the next station. The one before our stop this woman and the man sitting next to her got up to get off. When they passed us the woman looked directly at me and smiled, and went on.

Then I told Nancy about it. She didn't know whether to believe me or not—until I reminded her of our joint dream. After that she believed me. It tied in too closely. Telepathy. I'd never paid any attention to the stuff. Neither had Nancy.

We talked about it a lot. A couple of nights later we got out a deck of cards and tried some experiments in telepathy. After a couple of hours, when we added up the results, they agreed with pure chance.

We tried some other experiments. No results at all.

We had a party at our house. After that there was a regular round of parties and doings for a while. We forgot all about our two experiences.

We even forgot the dates. So I don't know whether it was six months or five months later.

THE ALARM went off. That's what I thought. I jumped out of a sound sleep and groped to turn it off. Only it wasn't ringing. I turned on the light. There was still fifteen minutes before it should go off.

"Oh well," I grumbled, and shut it off.

Then I remembered. "Nancy," I said, turning.

She was looking at me with frightened eyes.

"Oh, Lord," I groaned. "Don't tell me you had the same dream I did again."

"M-maybe."

"Look," I said. "Let's do this right. Don't say a word."

I climbed out of bed and went into the living room. When I came back I had two sheets of paper and two pencils.

"Here," I said. "Write it down. I'll do the same."

I wrote with the feeling that it was just a formality. We both knew we had had the same dream together. We didn't need any paper and pencil.

And we didn't.

In the dream I had been driving the car. Nancy was beside me. Up ahead we saw the red lights of police cars and the long body of an ambulance. There were other cars at the curbs and people in a small crowd.

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There was something on the pavement covered with a blanket, and a policeman with a pad and pencil in hand was squatted down talking with what was under the blanket.

Nancy had said, "Don't stop, John. I couldn't stand it."

I drove past at a crawl, and we both saw the long ribbon of bright red that stretched from the thing under the blanket to the gutter, where it widened into a pool.

That was the end of the dream. I handed Nancy my sheet of paper and she handed me hers, and we had written the same thing. Almost word for word.

"Where was it?" Nancy asked, almost in a whisper.

"I don't know," I said, "but I can find it. Let's fix some coffee and make sure."

Three-quarters of an hour later we cruised slowly past the spot. It was deserted. The cars and the ambulance were gone. The blanket and what it hid were gone. So was the bright ribbon of blood. In its place was a broad wet steak. Evidence of the street-cleaning department.

We had breakfast at a cafeteria and Nancy caught the bus home. After she was on the bus I went to where I had parked the car.

I went around to the front of the car and carefully inspected every square inch of it for signs of blood, or dents, that might show whether something had been hit by my car.

I DIDN'T find anything. When I was sure nothing larger than a butterfly had been hit by my car, I relaxed.

It had only been a dream. A joint dream. Something for Charles Forte or Ripley maybe, but still just a dream.

I kept telling myself that all morning at work. When I got back from lunch there was a call for me. The switchboard girl had written down the number.

"Who was it?" I asked. "I don't know this number."

"I don't know," she said evasively.

"Didn't you..." I started to ask. It would be simpler just to call the number and find out. I shrugged. "Dial it for me, will you, Marge? I'll reach my desk about the time you get them."

The voice at the other end was a woman's. "John Stevens?" she echoed. "This is the General Hospital, Mr. Stevens. Your wife had an accident. Not—"

"What!" I screeched. "Hang on! I'll be right down."

I slammed the receiver and bolted out of the office. No need saying anything to anyone. I could see by their faces that they all knew from the first call. Marge just hadn't told me.

I didn't bother with my car. A taxi was outside. I just got in and said, "General Hospital, and hurry."

At the hospital a nurse led me down a flight of stairs to the basement, and down a long hall, through swinging doors.

Nancy was there on a stretcher with big wheels. Two doctors and a couple of nurses were working over her so that all I could see was her feet and one of her arms.

"Mr. Stevens is here," my escort said, and left.

I was ignored for a couple of minutes. Then one of the doctors looked my way and smiled encouragingly. "She'll be all right," he said. "Broken nose and some bruises. We're setting the nose. About done."

"Hlllo...Jnnn," Nancy said sleepily.

I hovered as close as I could get until they let me hold her hand. Her eyes were closed. She blinked them open briefly and closed them again.

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"What happened, darling?"

"It's rather painful for her to talk now," one of the doctors said to me. "There's an officer waiting in the reception room to talk with you about it."

"Will she be all right?"

"Of course. I'd suggest you talk with the officer and then come back. We've given her a sedative. She'll be asleep. But you can stay with her as long as you wish."

I bent over and kissed her carefully on the cheek.

"WE HAD the car towed to the city garage," the policeman said. "You can make your own arrangements to have it repaired."

"What happened?" I asked.

"She drove into a tree. She must have dozed off. Wasn't going very fast, fortunately. Bent the front bumper and smashed a headlight and fender. Come on, I'll take you to the garage in my car."

It was the only time I had ever been in a police car. The policeman drove with efficient speed, but didn't use his siren. I sat on the edge of the seat.

Nancy's car looked pathetically forlorn with its nose to the concrete wall. The policeman asked me if he should wait. I dismissed him with a "No, I'll catch a taxi back to the office," and went around the car to look at the damage.

The front bumper was bent all right. And the fender and its headlight were smashed into a shape that was suggestive of a tree trunk.

I stared at it, wondering how Nancy could have done it. She couldn't have fallen asleep. Maybe something had gone wrong. Part of the steering mechanism. I'd have the mechanic find out for sure before he turned the car loose again.

I became aware that something about the damage was bothering me. What was it? I studied it, frowning. And after a while I knew.

It had been over a month since the car had been washed. It wasn't dirty. Just dusty. *But the entire area of the damage was as clean and slick as if it had been freshly scrubbed with soap and water.*

It hadn't been done after the accident, either. There were flakes of tree bark caught in the bent parts, and they were loose.

A dim suspicion formed in my mind. I thrust it away, but it returned with screaming accusation.

I had examined the front of my car to make sure there was no damage such as would be made by hitting a pedestrian. Had Nancy gone home and done the same thing? Had she found a broken headlight? Blood?

It would have had to be blood to necessitate scrubbing. If it weren't blood she could have just gone out and deliberately run into a tree to account for the damage.

There had been blood *and* damage. She had cleaned off the blood and deliberately run into a tree. Only she had underestimated the force of the collision and been hurt.

There it was. But it didn't make sense.

WE HAD had a joint dream. Someone had been hurt. Maybe killed. What did we do in that joint dream? Did we go out riding and run into that poor fellow? And just remember the part of it where we drove by again to see how badly we had hurt him?

"This your car, mister?"

I jerked out of my thoughts and looked at the garage man, and nodded.

"What d'you want done with it?"

"I don't know yet," I said. "I...

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tell you what: leave it the way it is for now. I'll pay the storage when I take it out. I want to think it over before I have it fixed."

I left. At the corner drugstore I called the office and got permission to stay away the rest of the day. Then I caught a taxi and returned to the hospital.

The meter in the cab was ticking. It seemed that with each click of the meter another thought clicked into place to torture me. We had had that dream about a house, and it had burned to the ground. I had had that experience of a woman reading my mind. Or had I read *her* mind? I had read hers, or I would never have been aware of her reading mine.

And there had been the dream of the injured pedestrian.

There was one thing Nancy never did. That was drive my car. And there was one thing I never did. Drive her car.

It had been her car that...that...

I couldn't put the thought into words. But it was there just the same.

I was glad Nancy was asleep when I arrived at the hospital. She would have read what I was thinking in my eyes. I needed time to get hold of myself and decide what to do.

She was in a private room. I sat by her bed for a while and watched her. When it began to grow dark I went down and bought a paper.

I hadn't thought about a paper until I came back and turned on a light to read by. Now I searched for some mention of the accident.

It was on an inside page. Three fatalities during the past twenty-four hours. His name was Lester Brown, age fifty-eight. He left a widow and three married children and seven grandchildren. Hit and run.

To the newspaper it was another statistic. He had died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.

Yes, on the way to the hospital, after he had lain there, a pathetic mass of broken flesh and bones, his life's blood streaming into the gutter, while a policeman asked him questions.

"What's your name?"

While blood flows from severed veins.

"Your age?"

"Married?"

"I'm bleeding...."

But they have to have their statistics. It wasn't Nancy that killed him. It was the police with their questions.

Nancy.

I threw the paper across the room into a corner and stood up. Resisting the impulse to run—anywhere—I stood there looking down at my wife.

Both of her eyes were getting dark now. The aluminum shape that covered her nose made her look a little like a robot. Why the hell hadn't she just washed off the blood and had the damage fixed and said nothing about it? Then I wouldn't have had to know.

With the realization that that was utter selfishness, I saw her in a new light. Poor Nancy. She was bewildered. There was something wrong with her. Had to be. Normal people don't get up in the night and do things and go back to bed and not know they were up.

*What would I have done if I had found the front of my car damaged?* Maybe the same thing she had done.

The door opened. The night nurse came in. "You can come back in the morning," she said.

OUT ON the sidewalk in front of the hospital I tried to recall where I had parked my car—and remembered with a start that it was at the parking lot near the office.

I decided to walk to the lot. By the time I reached it I was feeling a sense

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of unreality about the whole day. The parking lot was dark, my car a vague shadow against a sinister backdrop of darkness. As I approached it in the gloom, two bright dots winked up at me from underneath it, then winked out, and a scurry of movement fled past me. A cat maybe. Far away a police siren moaned into life and rose to a high scream that fled.

My hands shook as I put the key in the doorlock. A moment later I had the motor running and the headlights on. The gloom fled, but not the sense of unreality. It hovered around me, making the streets I drove through deserted canyons peopled by soulless spectres.

At home I left the car in the driveway. The house— I tried to remember the last time I had come home late with Nancy not there. There had never been another time. This was the first.

I hesitated. I could turn around and go back downtown and get a room in a hotel. Reluctantly I went up onto the porch and unlocked the front door.

The phone was ringing when I opened the door.

"Thank God!" I gasped aloud as I flicked on the lights and hurried across the living room to answer it. It would be Ned or Joe or somebody. I could talk and get out of my mood. I lifted the receiver and said hello.

"Mr. Stevens?" a strange male voice sounded.

"Why . . . yes," I said, disappointed. There was a silence that I broke by asking, "Who's this talking?"

There was a throaty, knowing laugh. "This is the answer man," he said. "Never mind my name."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked. But with a sinking feeling in my stomach I already knew.

"That little hit-run incident this morning, of course," he said. The careless tone vanished with his next words. "I want a thousand bucks to keep my mouth shut. Get this straight and get it the first time because I'm not going to repeat it. I want the thousand in bills not larger than a twenty. As soon as your bank opens in the morning, get it. Put it in a paper sack on the floor of your car in the parking lot where you always park when you go to work."

"I won't do it!" I said. "I—I'll call the police. You're trying to blackmail me."

"Ha ha," he said in a bored tone.

"Wait!" I said desperately. But my only answer was a click as he hung up.

I stood there, the phone in my hand forgotten, while the full import of this development soaked in. All the stories I had read of blackmailers. Murder mysteries.

There was three thousand in the saving account, twelve hundred in the checking account. In addition, Nancy and I had stocks and bonds worth eight thousand. And the house could bring twelve. Maybe twenty-five thousand altogether—or twenty-seven with the two cars and the furniture.

That thousand he demanded would be just the first demand. He would demand more, and more, until he had it all. Then he would let the police know that Nancy had . . . had . . .

I couldn't complete the thought.

I couldn't start paying, either.

But if I didn't . . .

By noon the police would know.

Unless I found the man and killed him.

It was as simple as that. During the sleepless night I became used to the idea. Certainly it was no more startling than the joint dreams, the telepathic incident on the train. In a way it was of the same cloth. Incomprehensible, but there.

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I slept occasionally, but with dawn I got an idea how I might solve things....

IT WAS five o'clock when I gulped down my third cup of black coffee. I went outside and drove the car into the garage. What I wanted to do first was quite simple.

When the right front door of the car opens it turns on a light on the dashboard. I wanted that live wire. It took me ten minutes to find it and get it loose. Twenty minutes more and I had two wires, one grounded to the frame and the other this wire that would come alive when the right front door of the car was opened. I fastened them to a small light globe and tested them. When that door opened the light lit up. When it closed it went out. I made sure that door was closed tightly, but unlocked. I wouldn't be opening it again. Ever. I also made sure the two rear doors were locked and couldn't be opened. That left only the door in front on the driver's side, and I could lock that so my blackmailer would have to open the other door.

It was ten to six. I went back in the house and took a cold shower to destroy the damage of the sleepless night. I fixed myself a good breakfast after I had shaved and dressed.

It was seven-thirty when I stopped in front of Fred Arbright's house. He was up. He was the local hardware merchant. I knew he carried dynamite in stock.

"Hello, John," he said in surprise when he came to the door. "What brings you here so early in the morning."

"My last fuse burned out," I said. "Nancy is in the hospital and is coming home today. Let me have the key to your store and I'll get some fuses. I'm in a hell of a rush."

"In the hospital?" Fred said. "That's too bad. Sure, John. Want me to come down and get them? Be glad to go out and put them in for you, too."

"No, no. I know just where you keep them. Go ahead and eat your breakfast."

He fished some keys out of his pocket. "Here's my spare. You can return it tomorrow. Won't you stay and have a cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks," I said hurriedly. On the steps I looked back with a grin. "This is my chance to steal some tools. Better take inventory after I leave."

I knew where the fuses and the dynamite were both kept. I took down a box of light fuses and took four of them, leaving the box on the counter. Shoving them in my pocket I paused to get a paper sack and then went in back.

How much dynamite would it take to make sure? I took five sticks. It had been over a year ago that I had been in here and Fred had been selling some dynamite. He had explained about the percussion caps, too. There were the fuse type and the electric type.

My hands were wet and slippery with nervous perspiration as I fixed one of the electric caps into a dynamite stick so the two wires dangled out. I tied the five sticks together and placed them in the paper sack so the two wires stuck out.

Out in front as I passed the counter I stopped. Taking a fifty-cent piece out of my pocket I laid it and the key on the counter. That way I wouldn't have to come back. At the door, though, I discovered I would have to have the key to lock up.

I returned to the counter and got it. When I turned around a policeman was looking through the plate glass windows at me. He was waiting

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at the door when I opened it.

"Hello, officer," I greeted him casually.

He nodded. "You work here?"

"No," I said, turning my back on him and locking the door. "Fred loaned me his key to get some—some things." I had the door locked now. I turned and thrust the key at him. "Would you give him this when he comes down? Save me a trip back later."

"Sure," he said, taking it. He glanced curiously at the paper sack with its two wires dangling out.

I went to my car and got in. Out of the corner of my eye I could see him jotting down my license number.

I thought it over. I couldn't see how it would affect my plans. He would find Fred had given me the key. He wouldn't pursue the matter. If he did there would be the unexplainable mystery of the paper bag. Did Fred keep records on how much dynamite he sold? I doubted it. He was they type who ordered when he ran out.

After several blocks I parked at the curb and attached my paper sack bomb to the wires from the dashboard, and arranged things so that anyone looking into the car would only see the paper sack on the floor.

There was no danger as long as the right front door wasn't opened. Just the same, I drove slowly the rest of the way to the parking lot.

THERE was a stranger sitting in a car near where I parked. Was he the blackmailer? Or was it the man who had been standing on the sidewalk when I drove in?

I shrugged mentally. It didn't matter now. I couldn't lose. I grinned wolfishly at the man on the sidewalk and walked past him to the office.

It was two minutes until eight-thirty when I went in. Things couldn't have worked out better if I had timed them!

Eight-thirty, and there were two men waiting in the reception room. Strangers. Anyone could walk in at any time and look through the windowed partition to my desk and see if I was there. The blackmailer could. And the bank didn't open until ten.

My fellow workers were asking about Nancy. I called the hospital and learned she had slept well. I told them to tell her I would see her at one o'clock.

I did my work and tried to ignore the people that were in the reception room. At five minutes to ten I told the boss I had to go to the bank and get some money to pay Nancy's bill at the hospital.

At ten I was the first one to enter the bank. I wrote a counter check for a thousand and presented it at a teller's window and asked for the money in fives and tens and twenties. To my great relief he put it in a brown paper bag similar to the one that concealed my bomb.

From the bank I walked straight to the parking lot and my car. I unlocked the door on the driver's side, acutely conscious of what would happen if it were the other door. Out of the corners of my eyes I made sure no one was close enough to notice what I was doing.

Taking the packages of money out of the bag, I distributed them in my pockets so they wouldn't show. Wadding up the bag I shoved it under the seat. Then I got out and locked the door again, and left. The dynamite bomb was where I had placed it.

Out on the sidewalk I slowed down, waiting. Would the blackmailer rush to the car? Or would he wait until I returned to the office?

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SUDDENLY I became aware that a strange reaction was setting in. For the first time, I think, I thought of what I had been doing in its true light. Murder.

If it had been I who hit and killed that pedestrian I would have given myself up and faced the music. I couldn't do that to Nancy. I couldn't even let her know I knew it myself.

"Get in that car over there."

The low, urgently threatening words broke into my thoughts bewilderingly. "Huh?" I said vaguely, looking around.

"This gun in my pocket will go off if you don't." The speaker was a man who seemed familiar, though I couldn't place him.

"What is this?" I asked weakly.

"Shut up and get in that car!" he snarled under his breath.

I looked in the direction he pointed. There was a car at the curb, its door open. A woman was behind the wheel, her face averted so I couldn't see it.

I glanced down at the man's pocket. There was unmistakably a gun there. I got in the car beside the woman. The man opened the back door and got in. When his door slammed, the woman started the car and I got my first glimpse of her face.

"You're the woman on the train!" I said. I turned and looked at the man again. He was the one who had been with her!

"Right," she said crisply. "Now, take all that money out of your pockets and toss it into the back seat. Then we'll let you out."

"Wh-what money?" I gasped. "Are you the blackmailers? I left the money in my car for you."

"Ha ha," the man said dryly. And I knew it was he who had talked to me on the phone. "Get that money out of your pockets or we take you out into the country and work you over."

I did as I was told. A sense of hopelessness and defeat overcame me.

The man counted the packages of bills while the woman drove slowly. Finally he grunted his satisfaction and said, "Stop at the corner. It's all here. Now get this straight, John. We're giving you a full week. At the end of the week we want every cent you've got. You can keep your house and cars, and your job. Close out your bank accounts and sell your stocks. We'll let you know where to deliver the cash. In small bills. Then we'll leave you alone. That's a promise. And why shouldn't we? You will have paid all you can. We don't want any more." The car had stopped. "Now get out," he said.

The woman smiled as she had when she passed me on the train. I opened the door. I got out. The car drove on. And it wasn't until it was gone that I thought of license numbers. It was too late. I didn't know what good it would have done to get their number anyway.

Suddenly I thought of the bomb. Suppose the lot attendant wanted to move my car! I ran all the way back to the lot and tore the wires loose with frenzied relief.

I must have been insane!

BACK IN the office again I tried to concentrate on my work. My mind wouldn't let me: I tried to plan how I could convert my savings to cash in time. But my thoughts kept returning to the man and woman and their car. It was a maroon sedan. A Hudson. Another fact about it popped into my mind. The right front tire was a white wall and the back one wasn't.

That woman...

I understood now how hopeless it

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was. She knew what had happened because she could read my mind. I couldn't lay a trap for them because they would know my thoughts.

The woman was a mentalist. She could read anyone's mind. She could also project thoughts into a person's mind. It was obvious what had happened now. She had learned of the hit-run fatality. She had looked into a crystal ball or whatever that kind of person did, and learned who the guilty person was. It was probably a racket they worked on every hit-run driver.

I thought that over and grew more bewildered. It didn't account for the other joint dream Nancy and I had had about the house that burned down. And it didn't account for Nancy going out driving after we had gone to bed, and killing a pedestrian.

Did it go even deeper? Was this woman able to make a person get out of bed and do her bidding and not know it?

There was a sudden bustle of activity in the office around me. I looked up and saw it was lunch time. And I was due at the hospital at one.

Suddenly I dreaded facing my wife. We were very close. It would be almost impossible for us to conceal anything from each other. Wishing there were some way I could avoid seeing her, I went out into the hall to the elevator.

The elevator doors opened. Office girls were crowding in ahead of the men.

"Step to the rear of the car please," Joe was saying.

And like a lightning flash I knew the answer to what I had to do. It was there, complete. No bombs. No murders. No blackmail. I stepped into the elevator wishing I had thought of it a few hours earlier. I could have saved that thousand dollars.

It was too late for that now, though.

OUT ON the sidewalk I hesitated. Should I see Nancy first? I decided I would. If I didn't she would wonder why. I could tell her I had to get back to the office at two-thirty. That way she wouldn't learn what I was going to do until late evening or tomorrow.

"Mr. Stevens!" I turned. It was the switchboard girl. She caught up with me. "I tried to catch you but the elevator doors closed. The hospital called. Your wife wants you to bring her bed jacket and sewing basket."

"Okay," I said. "Thanks."

I was glad of the excuse for delay. I hurried to the parking lot. On the way to the house I began to realize that my improvised bomb was going to be a source of trouble. I kept it on the seat so there would be less jar on it, and every time I had to stop quickly I was in a cold sweat for fear it would fall off and explode.

Should I hide it some place in the garage? Uh-uh! I had to get rid of it some way. And fast. The river? Dynamite would float. Bury it? Where?

I reached home and shelved the problem of the dynamite while I dashed into the house and located the sewing basket and bed jacket. Then I was in the car again, the brown paper sack on the seat beside me.

My heart was pounding painfully under my ribs as I entered the hospital room. Nancy was sitting up in bed, her face deadly pale except where there were purplish bruises, the aluminum nose shield quite prominent.

"Hello, honey. Here's the sewing and bed jacket," I said.

"Thanks," she said, a little high-pitched.

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I gave her a cautious peck on the lips. Then she was delving into the sewing basket, and I was saying I couldn't stay long, and she was trying to seem disappointed but being obviously quite relieved.

Before I knew it I was leaving the hospital.

And now—there was nothing in the way of my carrying out my plan. Except the dynamite.

I began to feel resentment toward the innocent-looking paper sack. The only way I had ever heard to get rid of bombs is to explode them.

To hell with it, I decided. I'd leave it on the seat.

I ENTERED the narrow, musty hall. Above each door was a small sign sticking out from the wall telling what was inside. I wasn't too sure what department. I wanted. *Traffic Violations?* Maybe that was it. But I'd always associated that with parking tickets and speeding.

*Homicide.*

That was the one I wanted. Afraid to hesitate, I twisted the loose knob and pushed the door open. Inside were three much-battered desks and several equally worn chairs. And four men in shirtsleeves, in various poses of relaxation. One was talking on the phone in that tone of reluctant patience a man reserves for a wife who won't hang up.

I stood in front of the closed door. One by one the four men looked at me and blinked a lazy uncurious acknowledgement of my presence.

"Gotta hang up, Marge. A man just came in." The man at the phone hung up while the receiver still chattered like Donald Duck. His lips made the motions of a smile. "What can I do for you?" he asked in a tone that implied he was quite sure I was looking for the dog license department or something equally inocuous.

"I want to give myself up," I said. "I killed a man."

Feet came off desks in a slow physical shifting to interested attention. Four pairs of hard eyes began sizing me up. I could see the same question in all of them. Crackpot or legit?

"Uh, have a chair, mister...?"

"I'm John Stevens."

"I'm Fran Hammerstein. Sit down and tell us about it." I sat down. "Uh...." he said, "who did you kill?"

Abruptly I was aware that I was feeling good. All the tensions that had built up in me were gone. "His name was Lester Brown," I said. "I hit him with my car. My wife's car, rather. I would have stopped, but I knew the way I hit him he was dead or going to die. I didn't stop. Hit-run, I guess you call it. Now I'm here to give myself up and take my medicine."

"Lester Brown?" Hammerstein and the other three men looked at one another questioningly, then with recollection.

"Tell us more, Mr. Stevens," Hammerstein said. "The details. How did you happen to hit him? What time was it? Which way were you going?"

I stared at him. "Good God!" I exploded. "I came in and gave myself up. What more do you want? I don't want to talk about it. In fact, I can't even remember most of it. It's like a horrible dream."

"Yes," he purred. "We know. We know. But we have to have the details."

"Well," I said testily, "I'm not going to tell them. So go ahead and lock me up."

"There's the door," Hammerstein said, nodding his head toward it.

I got his meaning but couldn't be-

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lieve it. "What? What kind of a police department is this? A man comes in and admits he killed a man, and you refuse to lock him up!"

"That's right," Hammerstein said tiredly. He leaned his elbows on the desk. "You see, Mr. Stevens, you are the sixth man to confess the hit-run killing of Lester Brown. Wouldn't we look a little silly arresting all of them?"

"The sixth?" I echoed, bewildered.

"Now, don't misunderstand me," he said. "I'm not claiming you aren't the hit-run driver. Look at it from my point of view. I have a job to hold down. Before I can arrest you I have to have enough of a statement so that I can prove you did it. If you refuse to cooperate there's nothing I can do. I have to refuse to arrest you." He spread his hands in an apologetic gesture.

My house of cards was tumbling around me. My wonderful plan was falling apart. I had been going to give myself up. Under the law it would be less than first-degree murder. I would get a prison sentence. In a few years I would be free. No one could blackmail me. Nancy would probably come forward and confess, but they wouldn't want her when they had me to clear their books.

It had never occurred to me I would have to prove I did it. How could I prove it? I didn't know the details. Still . . .

"All right," I said. "It was night before last. I don't remember the time. I think maybe it was around three in the morning. I was driving my wife's car. I was speeding along Fifth Street."

"In which direction?"

"North, I think. Yes, it was north."

He spread his hands and sighed. "There you are. The car that killed him was headed south and threw him across the street. And the time was eleven-twenty."

"Eleven-twenty? But we didn't go to bed until eleven thir—!"

It was a slip, but I didn't care now. One crystal-clear fact had just now emerged from the whole insane mess. *At eleven-twenty both Nancy and I were awake and at home!*

"I GUESS that proves I didn't do it," I said happily. "I'm sorry I bothered you." I laughed weakly. "You must think I'm a crackpot. I'm not, really. This is the first time I—"

"Common enough," Hammerstein grunted. "People get a guilt complex. They get the conviction they should be punished, and their imaginations dwell on it. Nothing dangerous, though. That kind would never hurt a fly."

"Yes," I said, rising and going toward the door. "That must be it. I'm going to see a good psychiatrist."

In the hall I hurried, my footsteps echoing loudly. I had no intention of seeing a psychiatrist. I was going straight to the hospital and tell Nancy what I had learned. She couldn't possibly have been the hit-run driver.

I had had to park a block and a half away from the police station. I trotted. And I felt like singing. Our troubles were over. No blackmail any more. I'd never realized how tough the police are. I could laugh now at my naive belief that all the blackmailer had to do was make an anonymous call to the police department and Nancy would be arrested and sent to the penitentiary for the best years of her life. And this was much better than the solution I had picked: to spend those years in the pen for her.

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I had my key out as I reached the car. I went around to the driver's side, watching traffic so I wouldn't be hit. The key wouldn't go in the lock. I looked down. There was chewing gum in the lock.

"Damn!" I grumbled. "Of all the times to have brat vandals horsing around with something like that!"

I went around the car to the sidewalk and inserted the key in the right-hand door. The right-hand door. I remembered when I had made that a lethal trap. My eyes unconsciously went to the seat where I had left the bomb.

The brown paper sack lay there, looking quite innocent. I pushed down the door handle. The door cracked open an inch. I started to pull it open.

It wasn't the same paper bag!

I stopped, my eyes studying it. What was different about it? The shade of brown wasn't the same, for one thing. For another, there weren't any wires sticking out of it.

My eyes explored the gloom under the dashboard. The bomb was there, not noticeable unless you were looking for it. The wires were connected to it.

I broke into a cold sweat. Carefully I pushed on the door until it snapped shut. Then I locked it.

It had been diabolical. And it had come within a hair of working. Those two had been following me. They had seen me go into the police department and the woman had read my mind on what I was planning to do. She had probably followed what went on in there. It had taken them only a minute to fix the bomb back to the wires and put the gum in the other doorlock.

I WENT back around to the driver's side and used the small blade of my pocket knife to work the gum loose. It took fifteen minutes to clear the lock enough so the key would work. I got the door open, and disconnected the bomb.

Then I sat there behind the wheel and quietly had a nervous breakdown. It's not a good feeling to know someone is trying to kill you.

I shook for several minutes. Then, abruptly, I knew exactly what to do with the bomb. I groaned at the simplicity of the plan and my not having thought of it at once.

It was only two blocks to the bus depot. I pushed the wires into the sack and got out of the car, leaving it unlocked, and walked the two blocks. In the big waiting room there were rows and rows of dime lockers. It took only a moment to put the bomb in an empty one, deposit the dime in the slot, lock it, and walk away with the key in my pocket.

I went back to the car and drove to the hospital. Nancy had her sewing in her lap when I walked in, but she hadn't been sewing. She had been staring out the window. She looked around with a bright smile, saw it was me. A look of fear came into her eyes.

"It's all over, Nancy," I said casually. "That old man was killed at eleven-twenty night before last—*and we were both awake and together at that time.*"

It took several seconds for that to soak in. It finally did, but I could see it only added to her confusion.

"But—but—" she stuttered. Then she blurted, "There was a bump and a broken glass on my headlight. And there was dried blood on it."

I sat down. Carefully I told her everything that had happened. When I got through we sat there, she on the bed and me on a chair, silent.

"What can we do?" she asked faintly after a while. "They want to

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kill you—us, maybe. They can read our minds. We don't stand a chance." Her lip trembled. "From what you say it wouldn't do any good to tell the police. They wouldn't believe us. They'd think it was a persecution complex—until after the—the *corpus delicti.*" She made a brave effort to smile.

"Maybe they won't want to kill us," I said slowly. "Suppose we decide not to do anything. Just go about our own business and forget the whole thing. They would know that. Then they wouldn't have any reason to kill us at all. After all, it isn't as though we knew who they were and had something against them we could prove to the police."

"Maybe you're right, John," she said. "We could try it. Only, could you ask the office for a leave of absence? I want you to take me home with you, and I don't want to be away from you for even a second for a while."

I knew what was in her thoughts. She wanted to be with me so that if I died she would die. I nodded. "I'll ask the nurse if you can go home."

THE HOUSE was quiet, lonely. It didn't welcome us as we drove up the driveway. I felt it, and Nancy felt it. I stopped the car in the driveway near the front porch. My arm was around her, supporting her, as we went up the steps and I unlocked the front door.

A chill breath of air met us in the living room. I could feel Nancy's shoulders tremble under my protecting arm. Somewhere there was a woman, perhaps sitting quietly in another living room, her eyes closed for concentration, and she was also aware of that trembling. Aware even of my awareness of it. Able to read our thoughts, to *know*. And to tell her partner.

We were two flies caught in her web. The house was part of her web, snared in it with us. If we could only walk softly, so as not to shake the sensitive invisible net.

"John! Turn on the gas heater!"

"I'm sorry," I said, jerking myself out of my reverie.

The walls were invisible eyes, staring at my back as I bent over the heater. Was there a bomb planted here? Had those two been able to open the locker at the bus depot and get my bomb and bring it here and plant it?

"Turn on the lights, John."

Nancy was lying on the davenport, her features strained. Was she too wondering if the bomb was here?

"Okay, honey," I murmured casually. I went to the wall switch, hesitated, and flicked it. Nothing happened—except that the lights went on.

I grinned, and in my mind's eye I could see that woman, wherever she was, smiling her little smile.

I fixed dinner. We ate it. I washed the dishes. We tried to play gin rummy and gave up. We read. We had a midnight snack. We tried gin rummy again. I fixed two double-shot rum-and-orange-juices. We went to bed.

Nancy lay in my arms, and gradually she relaxed. Her breathing grew slower, more regular. Occasionally she twitched in her sleep. I thought how peaceful it was. I wondered if *she* had perhaps tired of probing our thoughts, and gone to sleep. The evil-bloated spider in the center of her web...

THE FOG was green. An evil-mottled green, thick and cloying. And hot. I struggled into it, feeling panic as Nancy's form vanished for an instant, then reappeared as the tendril of green fog brushed past.

And the evil vapor laughed mockingly, and the laughter became a spirit

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that animated it and whipped it into swirlings that wrapped about me, dragging me backwards. Nancy was gone. Where she had been were only faint swirlings of pink and soft green, and infinite loneliness that was dark waters hiding horrible secrets.

And those waters were the face of *her*, as she walked toward me through the fog, her features calm and serene, a mask of middle-aged female respectability masking the soul of Satan. She reached me, and walked past me, turning her face toward me as she passed, and smiling as she had done on the train.

The swirling fog laughed at me, softly mocking. I pushed forward. I had to catch up with Nancy. I had to. And from the fog ahead came the sound of a scream. It was Nancy screaming. But it wasn't ahead of me. It was from the side. No, it was all around me. The fog had swallowed her up. She *was* the fog, just as was the laughter. Just as I would be soon....

I? I awoke, startled.

The screaming was real. Nancy was asleep, screaming. I shook her. The screaming stopped. She opened her eyes and looked up at me in the darkness.

"It was horrible," she whispered. "It was a green—an evil-mottled green. It was all around me, but you were there protecting me. Then you weren't, and I was lost...."

I turned on the light and got up. I lit a cigarette and stood there in the middle of the floor, taking deep drags to calm my nerves. Nancy watched me, her eyes incredibly round and bright, her skin bloodless behind the aluminum nose guard and bruises.

"I've got to find them and kill them," I said.

Nancy nodded dumbly.

"I've got to," I said. "You see, it wasn't a dream. It couldn't have been. I was there. I saw you. I tried to keep up with you. I couldn't. The fog wrapped around me and held me back. And I saw you go on until you were out of sight."

Nancy nodded, her eyes round and terrified.

"But how can I find them? And even when I do they will know. They even know what I'm saying right now. I—"

The telephone started ringing. I looked at Nancy and let it ring, insistently, demandingly. We both knew; it was that man. And after a while it stopped ringing, leaving a silence louder than the noise had been.

"I—I wish it would ring again," I said dully. "I'd answer it."

It rang again. Nancy's smile was wan as I left the bedroom to answer. "Hello!" I snarled into the receiver.

The familiar male voice purred, "Did you have pleasant dreams, John?"

"Sure," I said. "Very pleasant."

"My price is still the same," he snapped. "I'm moving the deadline up, though. I want the money ready for me tomorrow. I'll let you know what to do with it."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" I asked. "We aren't afraid of the police any more."

"But you *are afraid*. It will be worth the money, John. No more dreams...."

I heard a click at the other end. A moment later the dial tone came on. I lowered the phone onto its cradle and returned to the bedroom and Nancy's eyes.

WE LAY CLOSE together, wide awake, occasionally shivering but always cold with a cold that no fire could drive away. I had told her.

I revolved ways of murder over and over in my thoughts, rejecting each as

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I saw its basic flaw. None of them would stand a chance of succeeding if the victim knew what to expect in advance. There could be only one way to destroy a person who knew your plans. Catch up with him in open pursuit. If I knew their names, where they lived, I could perhaps go after them and kill or be killed.

As it was, all I could do was get the money and pay them off, and hope that would be the end of it. I had years ahead of me yet. I could build up a savings again.

The early dawn light crept through the blinds. The milkman's truck came into our street.

I got up and went to the kitchen and made coffee.

A robin came to rest on a branch outside the kitchen window. He flicked his tail and darted away. His life was normal, unaffected by anything less unbelievable than a worm. I stared at the spot where he had been, envious.

That was the basic fact about it all. It was unbelievable. If it were happening to someone else and he came to me and told me about it I would laugh in his face—or at least believe he was insane.

Was I insane? The same things had happened to Nancy—or was that part of being insane? If I could imagine things so vividly I could also imagine she were confirming them.

It just wasn't possible for two people to be in the same dream.

But it was. I knew that. I knew I wasn't insane and building all this up in my own mind without relation to external facts. I got two cups and saucers out of the cupboard. I was pouring the steaming black brew when I heard the knock at the door.

Setting the coffee pot down, I went to answer it. I could see through the window it was Fred Arbright. And he was the last person I wanted to see just now.

He was looking at me through the window so I had to open the door.

"Hi, John," he said. "Get your wife home all right?"

"Yes," I said. "Thanks for letting me get the fuses. Nancy's in bed. Highly nervous. Why don't you come over some other time?"

"Huh? Oh. Sure. Sure. I'll do that. I don't need to come in. I just wanted to find out something."

"Oh. The key? I gave it to the cop on the beat. Didn't he give it to you?"

"Yeah, I got it. That isn't what I wanted to ask you about. That isn't it at all."

I stared at his calm eyes and placid expression with growing irritation. Had he missed the dynamite? Was he here to ask about it? That was all I would need to make things perfect.

"Well, what is it then?" I said curtly.

"Alma, my wife, said to drop by and ask you if she could come over and sort of take care of things until your wife gets better. She's waiting out in the car, if you want her. She likes to do things like that. Makes her feel she's doing something."

I blinked at him. I started to say no. But another thought intruded itself into my mind. Someone else in the house would be good for Nancy.

I relaxed. "That's swell," I said. "Bring her in. We can all have some coffee together. I have to go to the bank at ten."

He turned his head and called, "Alma!"

A FEW minutes later we were all around the kitchen table, Nancy and I talking nervously, Alma and Fred calm and enjoying themselves.

Fred left at eight. At nine-thirty I left to go to the bank.

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At one minute after ten I handed a withdrawal slip and a counter check through the teller's window. "I want it all in fives and tens and twenties," I requested matter-of-factly.

He lifted his eyebrows as he read the figures. He went away. I waited. The line behind me grew longer. The teller came back.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Stevens. It would take us a little time to get that much in small bills." He pushed the two slips of paper back to me

"I expected that," I said calmly. "When could I get it? I can drop back for it this afternoon."

"I'm sorry," he said, avoiding my eyes.

I thought rapidly. "I'll tell you what," I said. "Change the figures to a thousand from each account. I'll take that much now and get the rest later."

"I'm very sorry," he repeated. "Would you care to step over to Mr. Grant's desk and talk with him about it?"

"Make it just a thousand from my checking account," I said.

He shook his head. "Mr. Grant instructed me not to honor your check until you talk with him. Sorry." He directed his eyes at the person behind me. "Next?"

Confused, I stepped aside. My confusion was replaced by anger. I strode over to Mr. Grant's desk.

"What's the idea?" I demanded. "All the years I've done business with this bank."

"Come in and sit down, Mr. Stevens," he said. "I want to talk to you." He waited until I was in, then went on: "If you examine your passbooks you'll read that we can at our discretion demand thirty days' notice for withdrawal. We seldom do that. And I confess we could give you what you ask right this minute."

"Then why don't you?" I demanded hotly.

"In the past there have been two or three times when we did what we are doing now and were thanked for it later. What is it? *A kidnapping?*"

"No," I said, surprised at this development.

He shrugged. "It's something. Something not good. Why don't you go to the police?"

"The police?" I said. "No. No!"

"So it is something," the bank official said. His eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Blackmail?" he shot at me.

"I'm not talking," I said. "You'd think me crazy."

"Perhaps not," he said absently, looking beyond me at something. I turned my head. There was nothing I could pick out that would interest me. Customers were in line at the tellers' windows. No one was looking my way. Mr. Grant was talking again. "You've always been one of our model customers, Mr. Stevens. I think you're in some kind of trouble. However, if you don't care to discuss it I have nothing left to do but honor your demands. I'll okay your withdrawals. Present them at the same window you were at and you'll get your money." He smiled at me and held out his hand. "I hope you will continue to do business with us?"

"Of course," I said, shaking his hand.

He scrawled his initials on the counter check and the savings withdrawal slip. I hurried to the window. The floorman held his arm to stop the line of customers and motioned me up to the window. I shoved the two slips through the grill. The teller opened the grill with a key and handed me a heavy briefcase. "The briefcase is the property of the bank," he said. "Please see that it's returned to us."

I nodded and pulled it through. It

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nearly floored me, it was so heavy. I walked to the exit with sweating palms and shaky legs. And felt the eyes of everyone in the place follow me.

MY CAR was less than half a block away. I went to it quickly, using all my willpower to keep from running. There could have been a bomb connected to the door again and I wouldn't have noticed. I unlocked the door and tossed the briefcase in. Then I locked the door and went around to the driver's side. A moment later I was pulling away from the curb.

I wanted to get home with my precious load. I was impatient with traffic. Cars seemed to get in front of me and slow down on purpose. Several blocks from the bank a red light stopped me.

I became aware that a car had drawn up very close beside me in the other lane. Someone was rolling down a window. I glanced over. My two tormentors.

"Okay, John," the man said, "hand the bag over."

I nodded and struggled with it. The man held a gun in his left hand. The woman had one in her lap. I got the briefcase between me and the wheel. The man reached over and took it from there just as the light changed.

The Hudson shot away from me. I noted its license number this time. QC73-16. But bitterly I wondered what good it would do me.

Suddenly I got mad. I had done so much thinking about how to eliminate the source of my torment. I had narrowed it down to a realization that there was no way to get these two except in an open chase, a kill-or-be-killed affair. Here it was. Their car was half a block away and widening the distance between us as fast as the law would overlook.

I felt a snarl form on my lips as I jammed the pedal to the floor. I felt the car lurch forward. Another car swerved in front of me. I put my hand on the horn and kept it there, hoping it would clear a path for me.

Maybe the man was twice my size, I thought as I nearly rammed the car ahead, then got around him with only a ripped fender, but the car would be the great equalizer. In the wild west it had been the six-shooter. Now it would be the automobile.

Those two speeded up and took a corner on two wheels. I had expected that. They would know my intention the instant I thought it. It didn't matter. Either I would catch up with them and crash them, or I would crash something else. I didn't care.

I laughed gloatingly, triumphantly. Win or lose, this was my round. I laughed, picturing the woman behind the wheel and knowing I was laughing. She would have to be a good driver. Even then the odds were for me. She was going into virgin traffic. I was following in her wake, with scared drivers already pulling out of the way.

I stole a glance at the speedometer. It said sixty-five. And these were busy streets. How much farther? Three blocks? Two? Ten? I hoped it would last a while. I liked the feeling of someone fleeing from me for her life. Someone who could read my mind and know how glad I felt, how sure of success.

The blocks sped past miraculously. Drivers and pedestrians had charmed lives this morning. I saw what seemed a thick ribbon of pedestrians suddenly vanish and reappear in a jumbled heap at the curbs, unstruck as the Hudson shot past, and me an instant later.

I heard a sharp sound. A hole appeared in the windshield on the right side. The man was shooting. Let

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him. I laughed out-loud. I gloated. I was going to die, but I was going to take them with me.

Suddenly they slowed. Instinct caught me unawares. I tramped on the brake and would have hit them, but they were taking the corner and I was trying to slow down enough to follow them and knowing I couldn't.

OUT OF the corner of my eye I saw it as I shot past. The Hudson was grotesquely telescoping against the front of a huge trailer truck.

My foot had remained on the brake. I was stopped. I was alive. I took the key out and leaped to the pavement, sprinting back to the corner and getting there so fast it seemed the Hudson was still telescoping.

Others were staring at the wreck in stupified surprise. I ran to the Hudson and looked in.

It wasn't a pleasant sight, even though it brought a wolfish grin to my lips. The woman's head was buried in the dashboard. The steering wheel was a loose ring on the lower part of the steering post, while the upper part protruded through her body, sticking out of her back. The man's head was through the windshield and the broken windshield had nearly severed his head. Blood was spurting in a rhythmic rivulet from his neck down the dashboard, to the floor.

And between the two dead or dying fiends from Hell the engine poked through bent metal.

I chuckled. The sound scared me. I chuckled again. Sirens were screaming in the near distance, their sound matching my mood. My chuckle became a laugh that wouldn't stop. I was free. FREE!

But the money. I remembered it suddenly. That sobered me. I had to get my money out before the police arrived. Where was it? I saw it on the floor in back. I wrenched the back door open and tried to pick up the briefcase. It had split open. Money spilled out.

"Step out of the way," a gruff voice sounded at my shoulder. "Can't you see it's too late to help them?"

I straightened up slowly and looked around at the grim face of the policeman.

"Help them?" I laughed in his face. "I'm trying to get my money. They robbed me. I was chasing them to get it back when they ran into the truck."

His grim expression hardened. "Oh, you're the driver of the other car?" he said.

"Yes," I said. "And that's my money there on the floor. All of it. I can prove it, too." I was saying it to what seemed hundreds of police officers who were crowding around. I was shouting it above the scream of sirens as the street filled with police cars.

THE SESSION at the police station lasted several hours. I had stuck to my story. I told them again and again that I had withdrawn several thousand dollars to transact a business deal and had been held up. Aside from that initial lie the story was true and factual. I knew they couldn't shake it. Policeman after policeman who had backtracked the mad flight came in and added confirmation. One man had been found who even saw the gun as I handed the briefcase over at the stoplight. And Mr. Grant came to the station from the bank to testify that the money was mine and the briefcase belonged to the bank. He seemed quite unhappy about the briefcase being split open.

Even Hammerstein came into the room and listened to my story, but

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said nothing about my previous visit to his department.

Finally I was permitted to leave. They asked what should be done with the money. I wanted to return it to the bank, but I had told a story in which I needed it, so I insisted on taking it with me after they transferred it to another briefcase from the lost and found department.

During the earlier part of the questioning I had been asked to hand over my car keys. Now my car was in the police garage under the building. I got in with my precious cargo and drove out to the street.

I drove slowly. In the rear view mirror I could see police cars following at a respectful distance. I grinned. I wouldn't have to worry about the money. They would guard me until I returned it to the bank in the morning with the story that my "deal" had fallen through.

It was five when I drove up my driveway and stopped by the porch. I got out and lugged the heavy briefcase out with me. Feeling deliriously intoxicated I went up the steps and into the house.

"Nancy!" I shouted. "It's all over!"

A strange face appeared in the bedroom door. "Shhh!" it said. "She's asleep!"

I remembered now. It was the hardware-store-man's wife.

"I'm awake," Nancy called from the bedroom. Mrs. Arbright frowned at me accusingly.

I dropped the briefcase on the floor and ran into the bedroom. "It's all over, darling," I said. "They're gone. No more dreams. No more troubles."

I stood there in the middle of the room while we looked at each other. Then I was at the bed. We were in each other's arms. Nancy was laughing and crying at the same time.

She stiffened suddenly, then drew away from me and looked into my eyes questioningly. "D-did you...?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Traffic accident," I said. "Both of them. Ran into a truck when I chased them."

We were together again. I kissed her on the lips, fiercely. She winced, then chuckled deep in her throat and returned my kiss even more fiercely.

THERE REMAIN only two more incidents to this story. One was our last joint dream, and the other—I'll tell about that later.

Mrs. Arbright fixed our dinner and cleaned up afterwards. Nancy and I were in each other's arms most of the time, separating only long enough, it seemed, to satisfy our suddenly voracious appetites with cooking that made me wish I earned enough to hire Mrs. Arbright permanently as a cook.

Then she was leaving for the night. I forced her to take a twenty-dollar bill which I snuck out of the briefcase when she was in the kitchen. She didn't want it, but I had to buy off my conscience on the dynamite I had stolen.

Then we were alone in the house, and very worn out emotionally. But overcome with a sense of peace we continually marvelled at. We had baths. We lay in each other's arms in bed while I told her everything that had happened during the day. She trembled as I recounted my pursuit through the streets, and I had to remind her that I was home, unhurt, and alive.

She was asleep finally. I carefully extricated myself from her arms and turned out the lights. I lay there for a long time, tingling, unable to relax and sleep. And then...

It was a hunting lodge. I had never

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seen it before. Nancy was standing beside me. Behind us was our car, loaded with bags and belongings.

It was made of heavy peeled logs. An acre-sized roof was supported on huge beams. I took Nancy's hand in mine. We went up the plank steps and across the wide porch to the massive door. I pushed it open. We stepped inside.

The room was enormous. Square beams supported the ceiling. At the far end was an enormous fireplace. A man stood there, his back to us.

I heard Nancy gasp with pleasure. "Oh, John, darling, isn't this wonderful? And it's all ours for two weeks!"

The man heard her. He turned, smiling. I recognized him. He was Captain Hammerstein, our host.

"You've never met Hammerstein, have you, darling?" I said to Nancy.

THE HOMICIDE captain came over to greet us. "I came on ahead to make sure everything was all right," he explained. "I'll be going back tonight. Old Joe, my Indian caretaker, and his wife and two sons will look out for you. There are guns. You can hunt if you care to. Or fish. Or just relax. For two weeks."

Nancy and I looked at each other. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"There's only one thing." Hammerstein's voice was abruptly stern. We turned to look at him, questioningly. "You aren't allowed to dream up here," he said. "Joe will be watching you. If you dream just once—out you go. Is that understood?"

"But why?" I asked.

*But why but why but why but why. . . .?*

My question echoed from the far walls of the room. The fireplace retreated.

"Because," Hammerstein said.

*Because because because. because. . . .*

He glared at us malevolently. His face began to dissolve. He was laughing, while his features merged into a gray swirling mist.

Abruptly he was there again, grinning.

"Wake up," he said.

*Wake up wake up wake up wake up wake up. . . .*

I was struggling upward. I was awake. I could feel the bed under me. I could see the early dawn light creeping in through the shades. I turned to look at Nancy. She was awake, looking at me with round, frightened eyes.

From somewhere in the darkened bedroom Hammerstein's voice was still echoing, "Wake up wake up wake up wake up. . . ."

"What is it?" Nancy whimpered.

"So you're awake at last," Hammerstein's voice said. "Turn on the light."

Shaking like a leaf, I did so. The room was bathed with light. Nancy and I looked around. No one was there.

From somewhere came a soft chuckle. It was in the room, yet no one was there. I looked under the bed, though I knew it couldn't be from there.

"No, I'm not under the bed," Hammerstein said.

"Where are you?" I asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Pull back the blinds on the window to the left of your bed and you'll see me," he said, his voice coming from everywhere.

Numbly I obeyed. There was nothing but darkness at first. Then my eyes adjusted to the dim light. Hammerstein stood there just outside the window. A headset over his ears. A button microphone came around in

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front of his lips. I could see him chuckle, and from somewhere in the room I heard him chuckle.

"This is how they worked it," he said. "When you were both asleep they spoke softly, using suggestion to create your dream. I found that out after we identified them and went out to their place. They had quite a racket. You weren't their only victims. They were a couple of phony doctors who perfected the art of suggestion while sleeping—and then figured out how to use what they knew to get rich quick."

"But she could read my mind—" I stopped. *This* evidence was beyond dispute. What about the other? On the train she had known who I was. We had already had that first joint dream. How many times had I felt someone looking at me and glanced up just as the person looked away?

I LOOKED at Hammerstein and nodded. He bent over and did something, then vanished. A moment later I heard his footsteps on the front porch and went over to let him in.

Nancy emerged from the bedroom struggling into a robe.

Hammerstein grinned at us. "How would you really like to spend two weeks at my hunting lodge?" he asked.

We gaped at him. Even now it seemed supernatural for him to know the dream we had had.

"Is it like we dreamed it?" Nancy asked.

"Pretty much so," he said. "Of course, it's a lot smaller. I painted it pretty huge for your dream." He took off the headset. "This thing was pretty slick. I could even hear your breathing. That way they could make absolutely sure you were asleep before they talked, and if your breathing stopped they stopped talking."

I stared at the headset. It was science. It wasn't something supernatural. A conflict was raging inside me. Some strange part of me was *wanting* to believe our joint dreams were of supernatural origin, *wanting* to believe there was such a thing as telepathy. Real telepathy.

Superstition? No. Nancy and I had entered dreams together. It had made us somehow closer. Now that was destroyed. We could never again have the illusion of our spirits' being together in a substance of pure mind.

But the illusion was gone. And the regret with it. We could be sane again. Ourselves.

"What about it?" Hammerstein said.

Nancy looked up at me, her eyes twinkling behind the aluminum nose guard. She nodded imperceptibly.

"It's a deal," I said.

"Good," he said. "Now I'll get out and let you get some sleep. See you tomorrow sometime. I'll give you the details then."

THE NEXT day I returned all the money to the bank except two hundred dollars for expenses on our two-week vacation. The office had okayed my extended leave. Mr. Grant accepted my story of the "deal" falling through with a twinkle of merriment in his eye.

I went down to the police station from the bank. Hammerstein showed me pictures of his hunting cabin up in the mountains thirty miles from town. They were remarkably like what we had seen in our dream, except of course not as elegant.

We made plans for Nancy and me to go up there on Sunday, two days away.

Finally I broke away and went home. Nancy and I relaxed. Mrs. Arbright showed up at dinner time and

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insisted on cooking. To get rid of her we said we were going out, already had our plans made.

To keep it from being a lie we did go out. We went to the Beachcomber and had Cantonese dishes and rum drinks and more rum drinks. We reveled in our freedom. We watched South Sea Islander waiters move noiselessly about the tables. We listened to weird oriental music and soothing Hawaiian music.

And finally it came time to go home. I signaled our waiter. He glided over. I didn't look at the check. I knew it was closer to forty dollars than thirty. I dropped two twenty-dollar bills on the small tray. He looked at me questioningly. I took the check and looked at it. Forty-two sixty!

I shrugged and dropped another twenty on the tray and said, "Keep the change."

"Thank you," he said.

He melted into the background as I stood up and helped Nancy with her wrap.

"Wasn't this wonderful, darling?" she murmured.

"Not half as wonderful as you." I caressed her with my eyes.

We drifted around crowded tables toward the exit.

And suddenly we were surrounded by grim oriental faces above arms that brandished knives of all sorts. Meat cleavers, paring knives, long, dangerous-looking bread knives.

"Stand still!" a voice shouted nervously. "We call the police. You stand still. They come and get you. You be sorry."

Stunned, Nancy and I remained like statues.

The unreal was becoming the reality again. This couldn't be us. This couldn't be real. It was another joint dream.

"What's going on?" a curious male voice asked from nearby.

"Blackmailers!" the voice explained. "They try to pass marked money given to blackmailers. We cotch 'em." The wizened face of the oriental creased into a grin. "Big reward. Thousands!"

"Oh, good Lord," I groaned.

"What does it mean?" Nancy whispered.

I laughed. "Nothing at all," I said grinning, "except that it's obvious now the bank marked all those bills they gave me, and the police sent out a warning right away—and they forgot to follow it up with an all-clear."

"What should we do?" Nancy asked.

"Careful with that knife, boy," I growled at the devil who had been our ever-perfect waiter short minutes before.

A cabin in the woods would be heaven. For a while...

THE END

# THE BUGS KEEP COMING

NOTHING is static. Each year thousands of new life forms are discovered by scientists.

According to the United States National Museum, the number of species of insects is impossible to keep track of, but around 5,000 new ones are recognized each year.

Recently, the National Museum cooperated with Australia in finding an Uruguayan moth to get rid of an Australian cactus plant which had ruined about 600,000,000 acres of land. After some search the moth was found. It eats the cactus from 2,000,000 acres of land a year, but does not feed on any of the Australian plants.

About 2,000 types of new plants are discovered each year; 500 new types of shelled creatures; perhaps 20 new mammals, and maybe two or three new kinds of birds.

—*William Karney*

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# TOOLS THAT NEVER CHANGE

*By*

*John Weston*

OUTSIDE of his ability to speak, if one outstanding characteristic of Man had to be named, probably that of "symbol-making" would be the first to come to mind. For that is what differentiates men from the higher apes, as well as the art of speaking. While we ordinarily connect symbols with speech, there is one phase of symbol-making which cannot be ignored, for it is the root of all of Man's material progress in wealth and goods. It is the art of the draftsman.

Drafting (or draughting, as the English say) is the technique of making a drawing of an object or a plan before that object is constructed or that plan is set into action. It is the physical representation of what the ultimate thing will be, and it is almost as old as Man. In tracing through antiquity's remnants, we find that the Egyptians were, so far as we know, the first to practice what we know as modern drafting. They inscribed their plans for temples, cities and buildings on stone and wood, and in the later dynasties, on papyrus. They used reed brushes and inks of various types. Their drawing instruments were rudimentary, consisting of the simple brushes mentioned, a wooden straight-edge, and sharpened bronze pin which, at the end of a string, served as a compass.

The Romans constructed drawing compasses and similar tools, very similar to our own, except that they too were intended for scratching into the papyrus. As one goes through the Middle Ages, one sees a rapid evolution of drawing instruments and methods very similar to our present ones. Leonardo Da Vinci's beautiful drawings were made with instruments which could easily be used today. Surveyors and instrument makers of colonial times devised sets of tools much like our own. Then, from the latter half of the nineteenth century, well into our own Thirties, there was almost no change in instrumentation at all.

Today, we see most mechanical drawings in pencil; ink is rarely used, and the drawings are made rapidly and in large quantities because modern devices are so complex.

The future of the art of drafting appears to be in for little change. Many photographic methods of course will be used for reproduction work, but the basic inventive tools of paper, pencil, straight-edge, compass and *brain* will remain the same. The only general trend in recent times which appears to be likely to be extended into the future is speed, for changes are made so rapidly in modern mechanisms that modification plans must be prepared constantly. The physical picture of drawing instruments will remain the same also; heavy, sturdy tools, capable of easy handling and withstanding the heavy pressures incidental to pencil drawings.

The day when mechanics and skilled craftsmen worked by rule of thumb is gone. Now, they make their mistakes on paper, where it's considerably cheaper and where damage can't be done.

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# INTEGERS DO THE TRICK

*By Walt Crain*

WITH ALL the numerous tracts written on the nature and meaning of mathematics, nobody has yet come up with a satisfactory discussion of the concept of number. Mathematics starts with the integers—one, two, three, and so on—and from there builds up through the negative integers through the rational numbers (fractions), then into the irrationals like pi, and finally into the imaginary numbers. But the foundation is the integers. And these defy analysis.

We speak of numbers as an abstraction of a property common to different things, in fact the ultimate abstraction. Two stars and two needles are as unlike as anything can be, yet they have one thing in common, their "twoness". Kronecker's famous dictum, "God made the integers; all else is the work of Man", seems to have a certain validity.

The ease with which we use numbers does not preclude the idea that they're very abstruse indeed. For example, many primitive tribes have never fully understood the number concept. They may have a number system consisting of one, two, three and "many". Any greater than three is "many". Their infinity is many. On the other hand, another primitive tribe may have a very well worked-out numerical system. Consider what the Babylonians and Aztecs did with their limited knowledge.

So when you examine any mathematics books, and when you study any mathematical systems, no matter how elaborate and complex and abstruse they may be, you will always find a gap when it comes to the explanations for the integers—there just ain't any!



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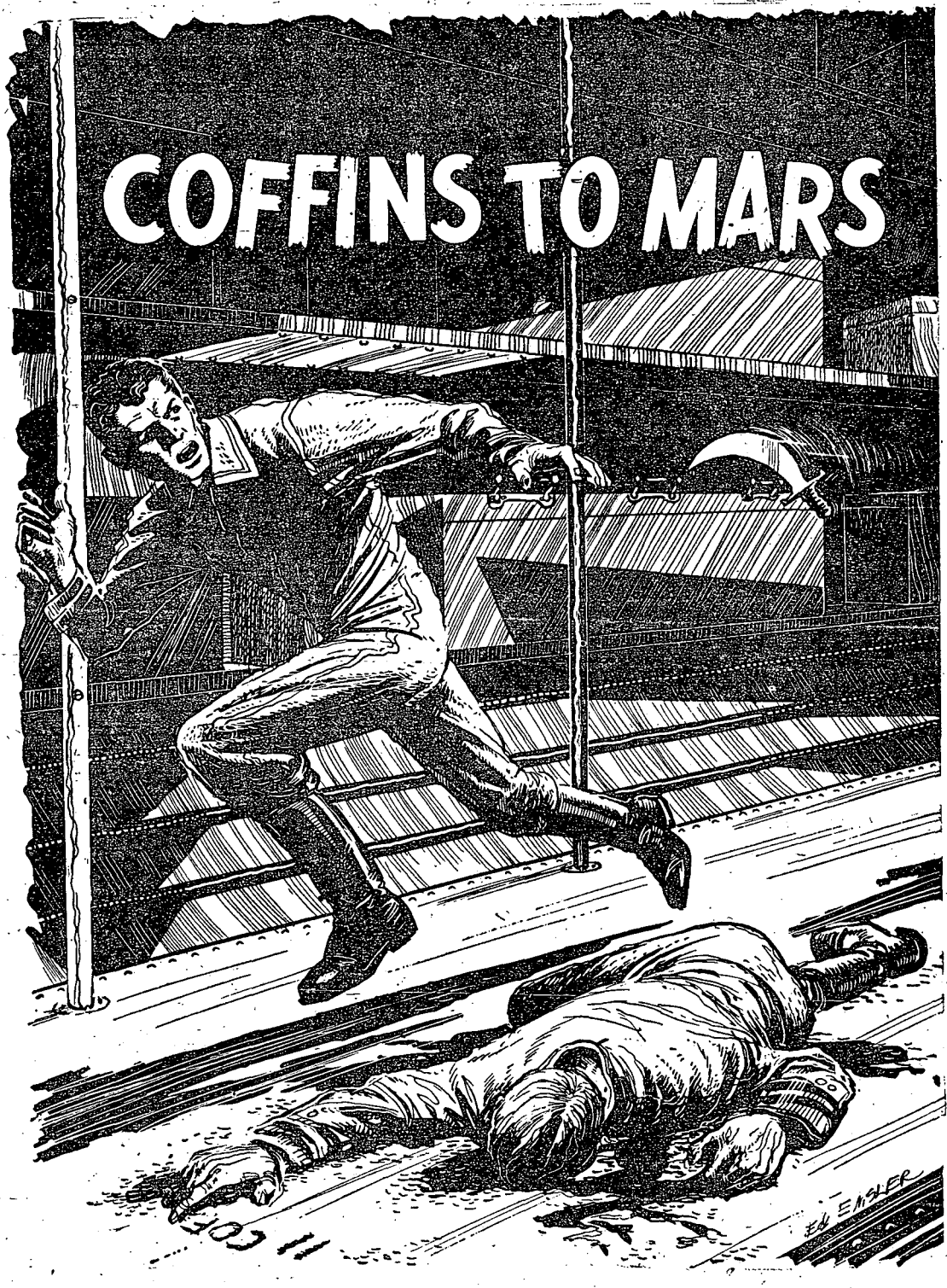




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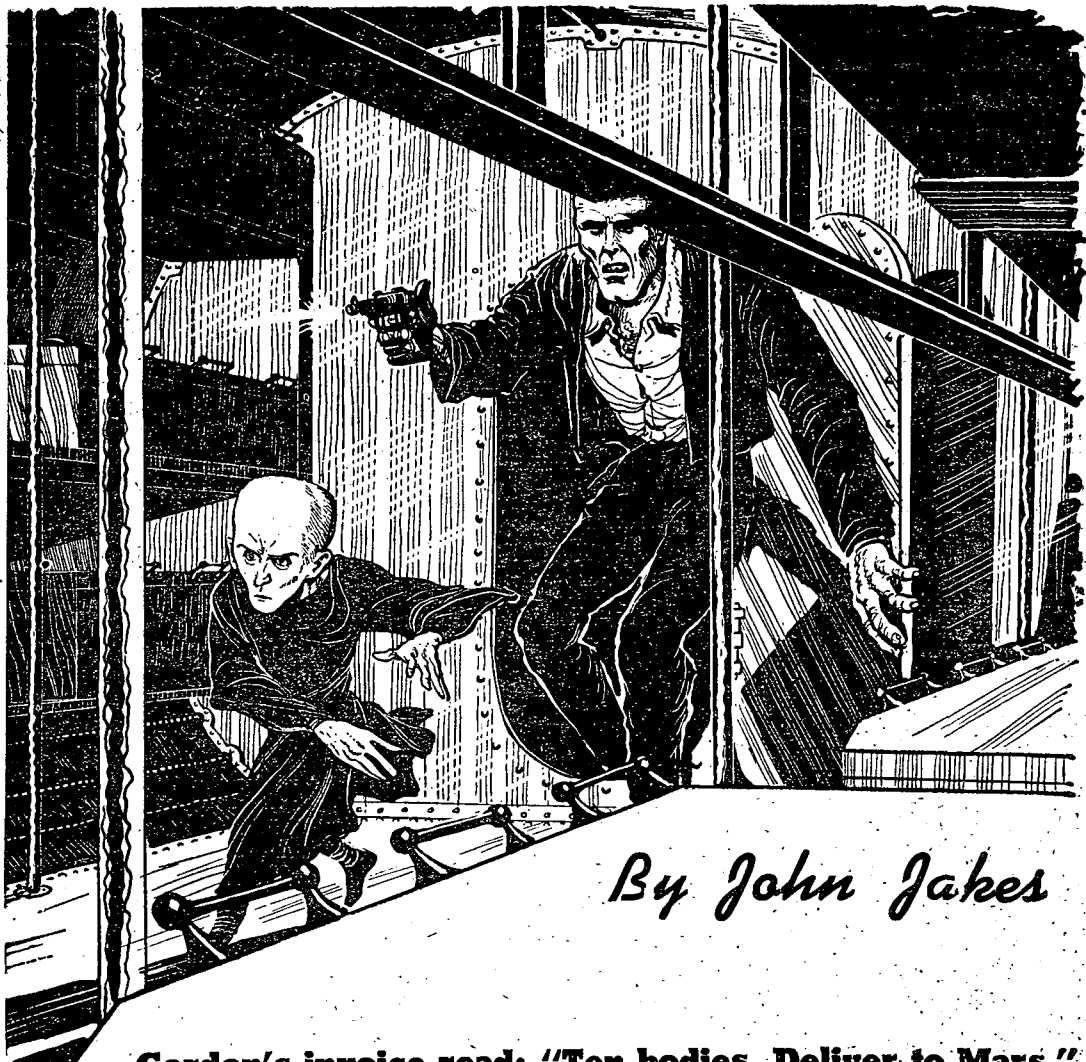

By John Jakes

**Gordon's invoice read: "Ten bodies. Deliver to Mars." But there was an eleventh coffin, and Gordon found it contained more than the dead body of a Martian.**

GORDON crossed the concrete in the wind and approached the ramp gate. The two Terran guards jerked their tommy guns up to the ready position as he approached. Gordon stepped into the circle of light, a tall heavy-set man with short-cropped reddish hair. He flipped the cigarette away. It arched high, trailing orange sparks, and vanished in the darkness of the night.

He fished out the credentials from under his jacket and presented them to the first guard. The man, a dark-haired Arab with the Globe Police emblem on his tunic, examined the papers with narrowed eyes.

"Gordon, eh?" he said shortly.

Gordon nodded, his eyes searching up the ramp to where the bulk of the



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rocket lay. A few tiny guide lights glimmered on its gray hull, but the shape of it was lost against the night sky. "I'm the pilot this trip."

"What's the cargo?" the guard asked.

"Coffins," Gordon said quietly. "Coffins with ten dead Martians in them. They were killed when the embassy got blown up. The government's shipping them back to Mars right away for burial ceremonies."

The guard flipped the papers closed. "All right. Your co-pilot is already on board."

"What about Tzerl?" Gordon asked.

"Tzerl?" The guard's black eyes glittered questioningly in the light.

"The Martian," Gordon said irritably. "The embassy clerk. He was the only one left alive. He's going with the coffins."

The guard turned to his companion, his eyebrows arched. The second guard stood in shadows, the snout of his machine gun protruding into the light. His voice floated out like a dismal ghost. "He went up while you were in the head."

The first guard nodded to Gordon. "Go on up."

"Flight time in twenty minutes," Gordon said over his shoulder. The guard flipped a lever and the red gate rolled aside. Gordon went through and started up the steep concrete ramp to the launching platform.

He was tired. The last weeks in the capital hadn't been easy, what with Raskin and his small army of fanatics blowing up the Representative's Chamber and a dozen other important buildings. Nobody had gotten any sleep. Armed bands of men roamed in the darkness, political killers, bent on setting up a dictatorship under the name of an intellectual aristocracy.

THE TEN Martians had died in the proceedings, and the Globe Council had hired the freight lines to speed the coffins back to the Red Planet and prevent diplomatic repercussions. Gordon had been chosen for the job. He didn't care one way or another. It was money. But he hadn't had any sleep for three nights, crouching in his apartment with the door barred while grenades went off in the streets and fires lit up the night sky.

As he reached the top of the ramp, he grinned dismally to himself in the darkness. There was the sign, hastily posted, glowing in luminous white letters. *Warning! Martial Law Is Now In Effect! Order of Globe Government.*

Gordon angled to the left. Fifty yards down was the entranceway leading up into the lighted interior of the ship. Gordon was glad to see the electric brightness spilling out onto the darkened platform. Somehow, the whole business of the trip made him nervous.

And worst of all, he reflected, that damned Raskin had escaped. A car had turned over and the giant of a man whose picture had been spread in every telo-sheet all over the world disappeared, leaving a broken cause and a horde of useless death and destruction. They said the uprising was six years in the making, fermenting in the trouble spots of the world. All that destruction, and then the leader gone suddenly, vanished from an overturned mass of twisted steel.

Gordon climbed the entranceway. He was on familiar ground now. He turned, pressed a wall switch, and the back door closed. He heard the entrance ramp being lowered into the launching rack. Through another door, and Gordon was in the main corridor of the ship.

He almost stumbled on Tzerl. The

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Martian stood in the shadows, muffled in his blue robes with his eggish eyes glowing softly. His thin bony hands moved a six-inch cigarette up to his lips. Gordon shivered as he drew back from the man. Somehow, the Martian's eyes were passionless and cruel.

"I didn't see you there," Gordon said clumsily.

"No," Tzerl replied in his sibilant whispering voice. His head looked like some great brittle shell. "Are we prepared for the flight?"

Gordon nodded. "Jet off right away. You want to come up front?"

Tzerl shook his head. "I will stay here. I prefer the shadows." He laughed, and again Gordon felt the sense of cruelness, of steel-hard will.

"Suit yourself," Gordon said. He started forward along the hall, leaving the Martian standing in the gloom, pulling on that outlandish cigarette. Gordon rounded a bend, went up a ladder, and slammed into the control room.

JERRY MACE, his co-pilot, wasn't there. An itch of anxiety raced along Gordon's spine. And then he saw the hastily-scrawled letters on the message board. *Checking our cargo. Will check engines after that. You can take her up without me, Rover Boy. Regards, JM.*

Gordon settled himself into the shock chair and began adjusting the firing keys. The window in front of him was leaded over. From start to finish, direction tapes handled the ship's course. Gordon controlled the jets by means of the firing keys and by watching the tiny yellow blips on the radar screens on each wall.

In eight minutes the ship was ready for jet-off. Gordon lit a cigarette. Why was he so damned jumpy? He was tired, sure, but he had made other flights when he was just as tired. Maybe it was the idea of carrying dead men. Ten coffins. It seemed incongruous, with so many dead Terrans lying in the capital streets, that these ten should be given special consideration. But then, they were representatives of another world.

Gordon swiveled the shock chair around so that it faced the door. Where the hell was Jerry? He wished the co-pilot would come back and give him some company. He didn't need him, of course. Two men rode the ships merely for relief purposes, since one could fire the jets and watch the radar adequately.

The wall speaker hummed.

*Control to Gordon;* the hard metallic said. *Flight 17, Commercial, from Capitol Port. All ready on launching rack. Please fire off.* Gordon flipped a cam. "Gordon here," he said shortly. "Firing off." He closed the switch and reached for the keys.

The engines began to cough, and then they rose into a roaring thunder. Shudders went through the ship. Gordon pressed Acceleration Key 2 and leaned back in the shock chair, hands gripping the arms. The acceleration made a grotesque mask of his face. In ten minutes, however, he relaxed and flipped another set of keys. The motors diminished to a quiet hum. They were in outer space, roaring through the black toward Mars.

HE DECIDED suddenly to take a break and look for Jerry. It was getting too damned quiet up front. He felt a pang of guilt at leaving the control unwatched, but he turned on the sound warning system. In such a short time, nothing much could happen.

The corridor down to the hold was quiet. The lights at intervals in the

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ceiling cast pools of yellowness that broke up the darkness. Gordon peered ahead, his boots clacking hollowly. He smelled something. The hold lock door was open. *What was that smell?* His mind screamed at him. He walked faster. Something was wrong....

He raced through the lock and into the hold. The lights were on and the biers were in their racks, steely sides glinting dully in the light. Gordon's eyes swept over the room, up, then down. And suddenly he knew what the smell was. *Blood.*

A ragged curse tore out of his throat. He knelt down over Jerry's body with the two-foot knife slash across its chest. The blood had spread all over the floor. Gordon looked around quickly.

Jerry's right hand was stretched out, the finger pointing. Gordon bent over and felt his breath tear out of his chest. The motors drummed distantly in his ears. In blood Jerry had tried to scrawl something on the floor. Letters, or figures. Gordon bent closer.

*11 cof...*

That was all. What in God's name was it? Gordon started to get to his feet.

"Eleven coffins," a voice said quietly. "Not ten. He was trying to write it out."

Gordon whirled. Tzerl stepped out of the shadows, his tiny mouth expressionless. One hand dipped into the flowing folds of his robe and came up with a crescent-shaped dagger. The tip was stained reddish-brown.

"You..."

Tzerl said, "Keep yourself quiet, Earthman. Your friend came down here to examine the coffins and I had to use my knife. Keep yourself quiet and I will not use my knife on you." His eggish eyes shone moistly in the light.

Gordon's stomach tightened and he stepped forward, his foot slipping a bit in the blood. Then the second man came out of the shadows next to Tzerl. This man had a pistol, heavy and black, with its round muzzle eye aimed directly at Gordon's stomach.

GORDON LET out a startled exclamation. The man was tall, strangely gigantic with his long arms, elongated jaw, and over-sized head like that of the Martian's. But Gordon recognized the tangled black hair, the scarred nose, the half-wild glint in the black eyes. The man was dressed in a loose-fitting black suit and a white shirt open at the throat. One hand rested casually in his pocket.

"*Raskin...*" Gordon breathed.

The man's voice was like a mixture of honey and thunder. "I don't know your name and I can't say I welcome you down here, but you're right as to who I am. Now I suppose you understand everything, in your own dull-witted way."

"You were in the extra coffin," Gordon said, his eyes counting quickly the biers ranged around the walls. Eleven of them. "This was a nice opportunity to get off Earth."

"My friend Tzerl here long remained my contact in the Martian Embassy," Raskin said loudly. "He was helpful, and the guards did not watch too closely the number of coffins, for obvious diplomatic reasons. But let's stop talking about all this. You've got a short enough time to live as it is."

Raskin's lips had a tiny curl to them. He towered, a giant of a man, looking down on Gordon like some haughty god, aware of his own might and intelligence. With the pistol he had complete power.

Gordon's insides were knotted up in hate. He looked at Jerry Mace again,

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lying split open and bleeding, his finger-tip reddened in the attempt to write a last feeble word. And here was Raskin, the man the whole Earth was hunting. Normally, Gordon wouldn't care. They were on their way to Mars. He was getting his pay.

But the whole thing reduced suddenly to a personal equation. A co-pilot slaughtered. Gordon had jetted with Jerry Mace at least a dozen times in the last few years, and they shared the comradeship of all men in the commercial rocket service. He was a human, a friend, and he was dead. It didn't matter whether it was Raskin the fanatic or a drunken port mechanic. Killing had been done....

Tzerl fingered the curved knife. Gordon said, "Can I smoke?" Desperately he pushed the words out. He had to have a minute. They were plunging through space. Mars in twelve hours. Mars and freedom for this man Raskin, this red-handed slayer who proclaimed his superior brain.

"The dying man requests a cigarette," Raskin breathed. His tone hardened. "Go ahead. Smoke. And tell me about your dull little duties on this ship. Pushing buttons all the time, eh, pilot?" He laughed harshly, heavily. "People are grubby, my friend, and I have no qualms about removing grubby people. I learned that many years ago."

"Which university taught you how to kill?" Gordon said quietly. He drew the smoke down and from the corner of his eye gauged the distance to the lock door. Five feet. Raskin and Tzerl were three feet to the right of that door. He might make it if he broke away fast. After that, he didn't know. Get out of the hold and then think....

"No university taught me *how*," Raskin said gently. "Just *why*. Because you and others like you are inconsequential, and your lives do not matter in the least. I tried to prove that in efforts with the government. I *will* prove it. I will keep trying until I succeed. For in the end, pilot..." He grimaced again, nastily. "Ignorance cannot survive."

Tzerl turned to Raskin. "Why not remove him now? Then we would not have to concern ourselves."

"I could operate the ship," Raskin admitted. "Of course we'll have to alter the direction tapes. We couldn't land at a large port. Somewhere in the mountains, until your friends can get to us."

The rage boiled up in Gordon. Talking about him, calmly, as if he were a chess man in a game, easily knocked over. No feelings. Don't concern yourself, Raskin. No feelings. Jerry dead and bleeding on the floor had no feelings either, no memories, no hopes. Gordon's thoughts ripped up and out of his throat.

"I thought we got rid of your kind a hundred years ago."

"My kind," Raskin said quietly, "are the born leaders. That German fellow had the idea, but he needed it refined by more education. Only the intellect can rule, and the intellect says kill in order to rule. You see?" He smiled again, and then the smile vanished. "I'm getting tired of you, pilot."

GORDON TENSED. Tzerl was staring at his knife blade, his eyes goggling somewhat blankly. Raskin had lowered the gun a little. *Careful....this is it.. very careful...* his mind whispered to him.

"Yes, pilot," the voice went on, "I'm becoming very—"

Gordon broke for the door in a dead run. Tzerl shouted something in High Martian and flung the knife. Gordon

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ducked and the blade clanged off one of the coffins. Raskin shouted, "Don't move, pilot—*stop*—" Gordon kept on running.

Raskin said an obscene word and fired the pistol. The charge, radiating light and heat, sizzled into the wall and the steel bubbled and melted and ran down onto the floor. Gordon dived into the lock and slammed the door. He hesitated a minute, catching his breath, then raced on through the second door and down the corridor.

An idea whirled in his mind, confused, born of suddenness and desperation. Born of hate and the desire to somehow prove himself an adversary to the superior black-haired giant who manipulated lives so carelessly.

He heard the lock clang open behind him and dodged around a corner. He clawed his way up the ladder, doubled back, scrambled down a second ladder and hurried through the cross corridor. It intersected the main hall in a T, with the control room doorway at the crossing point. Gordon hesitated, heard feet slamming on the iron flooring down the hall, and flung himself out toward the door, slamming into it with his shoulder.

He caught a wild glimpse of Raskin and Tzerl a few feet away, Raskin raising the pistol. Gordon threw the door closed, barred it, and dragged down the switch that sent the inch-thick emergency door rising from the floor. It slid into place as Gordon heard exploding splashes of fiery heat strike the other side.

The radar was making its blipping whine. Gordon checked the screens. Starboard, a tiny yellow dot. He estimated it as a drifting piece of meteor, or a fragment of a wrecked ship. Something large and heavy...

The breath hurt his chest now. His sides ached from the exertion. He pulled an axe from the wall and smashed the plastic tape case. He dropped the axe and stood staring for a moment at the internal mechanism, a tiny cosmos of whirring oiled machinery, softly clicking, pulling the white perforated tapes through the sprockets.

He reached in and broke the tapes, tearing them easily. The whirring died. The clicking stopped.

THE SHIP jerked and screamed a metallic scream as the direction vanes were drawn into the hull and thrust out again. Gordon smashed his palm down on the starboard firing keys and the jets roared. The ship creaked and turned. The yellow blip moved onto the radar screen directly in front of the control panel.

The door was giving off heat now, steaming, bubbling. Even the inch-thick plate was beginning to have a flowing, liquid quality. A tiny droplet of gray molten metal dribbled down onto the control room floor.

Sweat covered Gordon's body, plastering his shirt to him. He watched the screen. The yellow dot was closer now...closer...the ship was rushing on. He waited a second longer and slammed the starboard keys again. The ship wheeled, protesting.

Tearing, thundering, the thing that was only a yellow dot on the screen shattered into the hull amidships. A high whining sound went through the ship. The metal door stopped burning. Raskin's voice came through the thinned-down panel, lost and far-away.

"Pilot!" he screamed. "Pilot...the air's going...*pilot*...*the air*..."

Gordon stepped quickly to the wall and took down an air helmet. He bolted it on and turned the handle, breathing deeply as the air hissed up through the tube. Then his mouth tightened.

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Let him stay out there and die, twisting, blue, spewing his insides out, blowing up like a balloon as the air escaped through the broken hull. Jerry. Murder for Murder. *Mur—*

He stopped. No. He thought about it. Murder was not right, not even now. No, something more humane, yet clever, terrible in its twisting retribution. Harsh lines scrawled themselves on Gordon's face, and suddenly he felt a desperate need to prove himself, justify himself in the eyes of that raging madman out there. And justify himself, somehow, in his own eyes. For Jerry, for all the ordinary ones Raskin hated and destroyed so easily.

Carefully, Gordon set two air helmets on the control panel. Then he pulled the axe head from the handle, dropping the head to the floor.

"Pilot!" came the agonized shout, weaker now. "Pilot . . . please . . . anything . . . I'll give . . ."

Gordon pushed the switch back up and the emergency door slid out of sight. The other door was gone, burned away. Raskin stood there, his black hair tangled, his clothing twisted, the gun lying on the floor. Tzerl leaned weakly on the door frame, his eyes bulging.

GORDON stepped back, concealing the axe handle. He pointed to the air helmets. Raskin shrieked softly to himself, a wild kind of joy lighting up his face. He rushed forward into the control room. Gordon lifted the axe handle and bashed it down on Raskin's head.

The big man gasped, teetered, and fell forward on his face. A light blow toppled Tzerl. And then Gordon dragged the two of them, the Martian killer and the Terran instigator, out into the center of the room and bolted a helmet on each of them. He turned on the air. Down the hall in the supply room he found a coil of unbreakable plastic cord, and bound them tightly.

He realized then that the ship was tilting crazily under him. And the hall was cold with the chill of space. A ripped hull and the artificial gravity damaged. The axe handle floated by him as he tramped toward the door, clinging to the wall. He sealed up the emergency door again and switched on the Cabin Heating System. Then he got to work on the Communicator.

"Gordon, Flight 17, calling Control. . . . Gordon, Flight 17, calling Control. . . ."

*"Control here."*

"Damaged ship. I have a prisoner. Raskin. Come and get me." There was an audible gasp from the phones when Gordon pronounced the man's name. He continued doggedly, feeling a strange kind of satisfaction: "My coordinates are . . ."

A FLEET of police ships rose from Earth. Gordon walked with the guards down the ramp when they landed. It was morning, and a thin haze of black smoke filmed the sky. The air helmets had been removed, and Raskin and Tzerl walked solemnly, ringed by tommy guns. Raskin's shoulders were slumped, and his neck was bowed. Somehow, Gordon sensed that he was broken.

Gordon felt triumph surge through him. This was better than leaving him to die in the airless corridor of the wrecked ship. Raskin had convicted himself.

The party came out through the red gate and started across the concrete. In the distance, buildings still burned, sending that black smoke up to stain the morning sky. Gordon said suddenly, "Raskin. . . ."

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Raskin turned his head slowly, his eyes empty and vague of sense. The tommy guns snouted at him. "Smell the air?" Gordon said, his voice quiet. Heels drummed as they walked across the concrete. "Smell it? You hate us, don't you? But by God you've got to breathe the same air." He laughed shortly. One of the guards grinned. Tzerl let out a moan and his fingers moved in a gesture of the Martian religion.

It took Gordon a long time to forget the sight of Jerry Mace sprawled out among the coffins, his finger tipped with blood. It took him a long time to forget how Raskin made him low and useless and stupid, with only the turn of a phrase.

But Raskin, the political fanatic, the intellectual superior, was put on trial. Gordon read about it in the telo-sheets. And he saw the last picture. In Prague, at the World House of Confinement, Raskin mounted the scaffold, his eyes wearing a black bandage, and Gordon could see him breathing his last air, that air that levelled all men, before they hanged him.

And after that, Gordon could think of Jerry Mace and lift his drink in silent salute, and feel, within himself, that he had been right.

THE END

# WASHDAY FOR BLOOD

## By June Lurie

THERE ARE now about twelve artificial kidneys occasionally used both in this country and abroad. This is an almost miraculous type of machine—a blood-washing machine—used only when there is reason to believe that a damaged or badly functioning kidney can recover if given rest. Pregnant women subject to poisoning, people who have swallowed poisons or whose kidneys have been injured in accidents—these are the ones who benefit most by having their blood washed.

To filter out urea, the kidneys have to handle about 800 gallons of blood a day. If the urea is not cleaned out, as well the other acids and harmful substances which may accumulate in the blood, uremia results.

Thirty-nine years ago, three doctors introduced the artificial kidney. But it wasn't until 1947 that this invention first came to public notice, when an artificial kidney was constructed by Dr. W. J. Koff and installed in New York's famed Mount Sinai Hospital. Now, a new artificial kidney has been developed by John and Louis Guarino of the Brusch Medical Center and the Pan-Engineering Co. This new unit is compact, and simple, and one of its chief merits is its safety. The washing is done in a bath-water reservoir and a blood reservoir. The blood flows into the blood reservoir, into which the bathwater is pumped continuously, falls shower-fashion over the cellophane tubing coiled in the blood reservoir, then goes back to the body, in a continuous operation.

# A STAR TO WISH ON

## A. J. Kedzie

THOSE OF US who really believe that wishes made on shooting stars come true, will enjoy noting that billions of shooting stars speed into the earth's atmosphere each day, at the rate of 50 miles per second. They're fired by friction and consumed to dust in a matter of moments. Most of them flash so faintly they're not even noticed, except perhaps through a telescope. A few light the planet Earth by their sudden flamboyant passing, then either disappear or burst about 40 miles over the Earth leaving a luminous phosphorescent train in their wake.

Only once in a great while does one of these giant stars land and drop meteorites. There are a few historical monuments to commemorate these landings. One is the Arizona Meteor Crater which, when it fell, formed one of the biggest natural shell holes in the world. Historians are still trying to solve the mystery of when it fell, and geologists are still working at trying to dig out the meteorite. So far search has gone 1,200 feet beneath the surface of the crater.

The largest meteorite yet found was removed from Greenland. Admiral Robert Peary brought it to the Hayden Planetarium, in New York City, where it is a daily wonder to visitors.

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# IMMORTAL IRON

## By Paul Tate

NO SINGLE thing is a more insidious destroyer of modern civilization than the very gas that supports human life! Oxygen does its best to change the steel and iron-based world we know to a pile of reddish iron oxide. How much this costs in money and effort can hardly be realized, but each year a good portion of civilization's major capital—steel—vanishes into rust. A long time ago *Amazing Stories* ran a prophetic story, called "The Death of Iron", which visualized a savage disease attacking metals, specifically steel. The consequences were hideous. Today, we call that disease, slowed down, "oxidation".

Fortunately a recent discovery has given metal a new lease on life. You can't entirely prevent oxidation without making more alloys than the world owns. Nor will coatings and paints serve everywhere. What is needed is some restoring agent, some chemical which can change rusty machines back into new metal parts, which can turn girders flecked with reddish disease back into rigid beams.

A British firm has invented such a chemical bath, one which promises some day to make the antique junk-dealers' yards superfluous. A simple electrolytic-alkaline bath is used. Terribly rusted articles of almost any shape or form whatever are immersed in this bath and emerge glittering and shining like newly rolled or cast steel! Motors, typewriters, fences, beams, engines—anything at all of steel—are fed into the bath. Shortly, they come out glittering, changed from a ruined mass into a useful pieces of equipment.

The marvelous part about this new agent is the fact that it does not change the shape or dimensions of the object. It does *not* remove rust; it simply changes the iron oxide back into iron! This amazing property alone is sufficient to call it to the attention of science. The fact that it can be done easily on a commercial scale is doubly impressive.

When it is estimated that each year ten per cent of the installed steel and iron structures and parts change to iron oxide, is it any wonder that science is gaga over the existence of a chemical wand which reverses the process?

# WINDMILLS OF THE FUTURE

## By E. Bruce Yaches

EVER SINCE Don Quixote tilted the wooden windmill, that humble device has been a subject of amusement and jest—at best a measure of the quaintness of a time and place. But, actually, the windmill has potentialities which cannot be ignored, especially in a day and age in which power is so much in demand.

The electrification of farms by utilities has made the familiar American windmill vanish also, but plans are afoot now to revive it on a vastly greater scale. Meteorological studies have shown that, in certain areas, at certain altitudes, there are surprisingly strong and constant winds which, if harnessed, can deliver steady amounts of electrical energy from attached generators.

In mountainous regions in particular, some constructions are planned which will use windmill towers measuring hundreds of feet coupled to generators whose output is fantastic. Connected to conventional power transmission lines, these windmills can deliver back into the line large amounts of power, which means that the power plant can be throttled down a good portion of the time.

In some instances, the windmill generators can be used for pumping water back to high levels, thus keeping reservoirs full even in slack times and providing a constant source of waterpower energy. The windmill is obtaining its revival all over the world. It was known that, before the iron curtain clamped down, Russia was developing large wind-driven electric generators, but since then no news has come out. It seems reasonable to believe, however, that a good deal has been accomplished. Electrical energy is a valuable natural resource whether it comes from coal, water or wind.

Should some suitable storage device for electrical energy be devised, something without the drawbacks of the storage battery, it is safe to assume that windpower will become a vital source of power all over the world. Uranium is scarce—and wind is plentiful. And of course the obvious must be said—if there's ever a wind shortage, all that would be necessary would be to harness some of the vast amounts of political hot air floating around!



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# THE SLAVE MAKER

*By Don Wilcox*

**Melvin wanted to find out what made Kozmack, the rabble-rouser, tick. But Kozmack wanted to find out the same about Melvin, and his method was to take Melvin completely apart and investigate from the inside out.**

MELVIN BOLT never guessed he was walking into a trap when the pretty brunette passed him on the street. He never suspected that he was on his way to a private laboratory to become a human guinea pig.

In a black mood, Melvin had walked into the park. He had been turned down by his agent. "Come back when you've got something good," the agent had said, and the door had closed with a bang.

The closed door. That was for Melvin Bolt, the actor, the one-man show, the tragedian, the comedian, the vaudeville star. Only he wasn't a star, he was a failure. Twenty-five years old and he didn't even have a job.

He sauntered gloomily toward a



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The gibbering old maniac waited with the needle



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park crowd listening to a speaker. The speaker's voice repelled him, but Melvin went closer. He was curious to know what all the noise was about.

A stranger nudged him. "You know who that is? That's the guy you see in all the papers. That's Kozmack!"

"Kozmack!"

"You gonna join up?"

Melvin might not have heard. He moved deeper into the crowd to get a good look at Emerson Kozmack.

"You gonna join up?" the stranger at his elbow whispered.

"It's the last thi g I'd do," Melvin muttered. Join the Kozmack cause! That's what gullible people were saying all over the country. Million-dollar ballyhoo! Political poison! Lies and false promises decorated in gaudy red and yellow banners.

The late afternoon light fell across the stage. In front of the red and yellow flag, the speaker moved like a shadow boxer, beating the air as he shouted. His should r were broad, his face wolf-like, his eyes glittering with fire. He was an inspired maniac, Melvin thought.

"So that's Kozmack!" Melvin said to himself. And suddenly the glimmer of an idea came to him. He watched the man, fascinated.

He was still watching when the speech ended, the applause died away, and the seven noisy bally'oo artists leaped to the stage to give the crowd a final pep-up. Four fello s and three girls. In red and yellow costumes, they carried on like college cheerleaders. Drums and cymbals joined the rhythm as they shouted into the mike:

*Hi, Mack! Hi, Jack!*
*Join the cause! Go Koz-mack!*
*Kozmack, Kozmack, Ya-ay!*

"Damn silly fools," Melvin said under his breath. If the Kozmack cause ever got a start, these suckers would find ut what trouble was.

He started to walk away. Buttons were being passed out to the retreating crowd.

"Excuse me, gents," he said, trying to get by. Someone reached out and tried to pin a button onto his lapel. A circle of red with a yellow dot in the center, and black letters —JOIN THE KOZMACK CAUSE! —running around. "No, thanks."

"What's the matter, buddy? Aren't you going to join up?"

His new idea had taken possession of his mind, and at first he hardly noticed how the uniformed Kozmacks were pressing around him. He was thinking of his agent who had advised him to bring in a better act. He was imagining what he might do with an impersonation of Kozmack on the stage. What a character! What a chance for satire! He'd burlesque that devil to a cinder—yes, and put his whole heart and soul into the act!

"Excuse me, gents." His way was blocked. Young men wearing brilliant red shirts, each with a big yellow dot on the back and front, crowded around him threateningly. "Excuse me—"

"So you're not wearing a pin?" "Good chance to join up, buddy." "Only takes half a minute to sign your name." "Oh, tryin' to give us the go-by, is that it?" "He's a highbrow!"

"Let me by, please."

"The last highbrow that wouldn't join us got pretty mussed up. Lost some teeth. Never did find 'em.... Hey, who you think you're bumpin' into?"

They tried to maneuver him toward the booth where recruits for Kozmack were signing up. They locked arms to block him. He suddenly marched into them and lashed down with his hand like a hatchet. Four or five of them piled in on Melvin. He knocked two

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flat. The third one bucked into his knees, others swarmed over him as he went down. He rolled fast. They struck at him, but he came out of the dogpile and scrambled to his feet. He swung out of his coat and stood with fists ready.

"Come on if you want to muss me up—you in your fancy shirts!"

"The devil with him," the ringleader of the gang said. "There's easier ways to skin a cat."

The other Kozmacks brushed themselves off, threw a few dirty remarks at Melvin, and followed their leader toward a booth. Melvin stared after them for a moment. He was aware that several spectators had gathered to watch. A pretty dark-haired girl had turned interested eyes in his direction. He wasn't sure whether she had been a part of the crowd, or had just happened to come along the park path.

"That fellow handled himself pretty well," someone commented. Melvin put on his coat and walked away.

The low-down buzzards, he'd like to rub their noses in the dust. He'd take on the whole damned outfit, singly or all at one time. Just wait till he worked up his act. He'd ridicule the whole damned Kozmack movement right into the ash can.

Five blocks down the street he saw the same girl again.

He noticed her trim ankles, the way her red skirt and yellow blouse neatly filled out with eye-catching curves, her bright eyes and the ringlets of dark hair massed about her well-shaped head. And then he saw her drop the red handkerchief a few feet in front of him.

What a gag! The oldest trick in the world. He'd be darned if he'd fall for it. But still she was an awfully cute little trick, and she looked lonesome. And maybe she'd really dropped it on the level. He picked up the small square of cloth, and in a few measured strides had caught up with her just as she turned into the lobby of a large building.

She was turning into the elevator as he entered the building. The door closed and she was gone.

He put the handkerchief in his pocket and wondered what to do. He watched the dial above the elevator. The arrow showed that the car moved all the way up to the top floor. All right, he'd follow.

"Thirty-six, please."

"That's the roof, sir," the operator said, giving him a strange look. "Is that what you want—the roof?"

"You took the girl there a minute ago, didn't you?"

The elevator man nodded and the car went up. "It's all right with me if you know where you're going. There don't many go up. I know most of the faces."

"What's up there?"

"Some kind of a medical laboratory. The folks up there—you can tell them in the dark. They all smell like medicine."

Melvin stepped out into a glassed-in room on the ledge of the roof. It was a long glass corridor, air-cooled. The late-afternoon sun blazed through, and the green palms cast big leafy shadows across the tile floor. Standing by a small grilled iron table, glancing through a handful of mail, stood the girl.

She looked up in surprise as he touched her arm.

"Pardon me," he said. "But you dropped this."

"Oh, I did?" Her eyes were wide, but he thought he saw amusement, not astonishment, in her expression. "Oh, well... thank you."

"Don't mention it." He started to turn away.

"That was awfully nice of you. I

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would have hated to lose this handkerchief. It was a gift—and is a favorite of mine.... Say, aren't you the one who beat off those Kozmack fellows after the speech? You don't care very much for the Kozmack cause, do you?"

"I do not," he said harshly.

"I could tell you something—something I think you'd like to hear." She stood near him and touched his hand. "If you're sure you have no use for Kozmack—"

"What do you want to tell me?"

"S-s-sh! I don't trust these walls, especially near the elevator. Come down this way where we can talk." She drew him by the hand. "If you're sure—"

"I'm sure all right," Melvin said with tight lips. "The Kozmack stuff is slow poison. The quicker America wakes up to that, the better."

"And you mean to fight it?"

"How did you know?" He stared at her. She led him on down the glass-walled corridor. "You're right, anyway. I'm rolling up my sleeves this very day. I'm just one citizen, but I can talk and I can act—"

"And so you're going to fight it?" she repeated her question. She stopped and drew back a little, facing him, as if admiring his every word.

"Fight it with everything I've got! Fight it like it was a roomful of rattlesnakes. You're damned right I'm going to—"

The floor gave way beneath his feet. The trap door he was standing on had suddenly opened. He went down like a bar of lead, plummeting into the blackness.

HE STRUCK limp on his side and shoulder. He was skidding downward. Spiralling. Slippery-sliding inside a hollow corkscrew.

It was over. It had lasted no time at all. He went scooting out as fast as he had slipped in. He slid out onto a glassy-smooth floor. A trap door snapped shut behind him.

He had dropped only the depth of two floors. He was unhurt. He would have gotten to his feet, but the dizziness threw him. A big medical laboratory was spinning around him. White uniformed men hovered. They made room for a weird-looking naked man—a pitiful ghost of a man—who came rushing up with a small bright needle-pointed instrument in his hand. The naked man's hand lashed the air. He plunged the needle into Melvin's side.

"John, you're getting good," one of the white uniformed men said, and patted the naked ghost-like figure on the back. Melvin tried to rouse up to see their faces. His wrists and ankles were being held down. A numbness spread through his body. He felt very sleepy.

Knowing he was about to pass out, he struggled to catch a few quick impressions. He would remember the bug-eyed young man in white. And John—that pitiful rag of a man whose almost complete nakedness revealed needle wounds over his arms and legs. They were complimenting John for his quick action.

"Even a slave can become efficient with the needle."

John responded with a sickly grin. His lips and teeth were very white.

"All right, you naked wretch. Get back to your cell. The girl's coming down."

Melvin writhed inwardly. If only he could have stayed awake long enough to curse that girl! He tried to turn his eyes. Voices were fading. His eyes were closing.

"No, John, don't jab him again. Back to your cell. He's already out cold."

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Far away, very far away, John's cell door clinked. And then, dimly, came the voice of the bug-eyed man in white: "Dorothy, you certainly can pick them." Then Melvin heard no more.

Within the next sixteen hours he was knocked out cold six times. Sometimes it was from the medicines, other times from manhandling. Once he summoned his strength and went on a murderous spree, crashing equipment and trying to kill the attendants. Gun threats didn't stop him. Someone finally felled him with a blunt instrument.

Sick and tortured and short of blood, he lay in his cell more asleep than awake. It was forenoon of the next day. Morning light streamed down the shafts of Lucite from the roof garden two floors above. Through the narrow vertical slits in his cell door he could see the big oval-shaped laboratory room that arched upward two floors to catch the daylight from the roof balcony.

The girl and the big bug-eyed man were up there on the promenade, the closed-in glass walk where Melvin had been led to the trap door in the floor.

That was Dean Stetcher, the big bug-eyed man. Melvin's mind began to clear as he watched "Doctor Dean" try to make love to the girl. She was Dorothy LaRue, and her official title was receptionist. Her little office was up there on the roof balcony where the elevator stopped.

Melvin wondered what they were saying up there. Doctor Dean was showing the girl a blue book and trying to put his arm around her. She was eluding him.

Melvin remembered the blue book. It was full of loose-leaf notations about himself. They had put him through all the tests in the catalog. From blood samples to brain waves they had sampled and recorded his physical, mental, and emotional make-up.

What it was all about he could only guess. But this fact had evidently impressed them above everything else. In spite of all the serums they had injected into his blood stream—in spite of foods and medicines, shock treatments, and suggestions under hypnosis—he still wanted to fight them.

The doctor and Dorothy had now disappeared from the balcony. Melvin could hear them coming down the stairs. Weakly he got to his feet. He couldn't see the stairs from his cell window, but he could hear their voices as they came closer.

"I didn't know it was this kind of job." The girl was angry.

"All right, you know now," the doctor said. "You follow my orders and keep your mouth shut."

They stopped a few yards from Melvin's cell. Dorothy spoke in a hushed voice. "How soon are you going to let him go?"

"Now, what was I just telling you, my dear girl?" Doctor Dean sounded as if he were straining to be patient with her. "The less you know about our inmates, the better off you are. Let us do the worrying."

"All right. But somebody's going to miss him. You've kept him overnight. He's in no shape to go home."

"Well, what's he going to say to his wife and family when he does go home?"

"He doesn't happen to be married. He's one of the unemployed rattling around in the big city."

"That won't keep him from telling someone—the police—or someone."

"Miss LaRue, you're being very dense. You want me to draw pictures? This man is not going to be missed,

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see? He's going to be right here a long long time, and he's not going to be missed."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"You're talking too loud."

"I'll talk as I please."

*Slap!*

Melvin tried hard to catch a sidewise view from the vertical pencil-shaped windows. But, although unable to see, he couldn't fail to understand. The doctor had silenced the girl with a slap. Melvin's teeth clamped tight. All right, what was a slap? Maybe she had it coming. He himself had wanted to smash her pretty face, hadn't he? That innocent look she'd given him when he'd fallen through the trap door. Yes, that and all the cunning come-on play she'd made for him, leading him up there. He'd been hating her like the very devil every waking moment since.

But now he wasn't so sure. Those questions she was asking the doctor put her in a new light. What had she been getting at?

"Now we understand each other," the doctor muttered.

"Yes, sir."

"Don't hear things you're not supposed to hear. Don't know things you're not supposed to know. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Now the two of them came in sight. Melvin could see the doctor's round youngish face, his protruding pale-blue eyes, his round shoulders draped in the loose-fitting white coat. With puffy white hands he took his handkerchief and brushed the girl's eyes.

"Sorry I had to get rough with you." He tried to look into her eyes. "You've got to be tough in this job. You'll catch on."

They walked a few steps together. He slipped his arm around her.

"Actually, you've made a very good start. This catch you made yesterday is exactly what we need." He jerked a thumb toward Melvin's cell.

"Thank you."

"It wouldn't surprise me if you'd get a bonus on that deal."

"Thank you."

"Or if not a bonus, a nice dinner date. I can't remember that I have anything planned for tonight."

The doctor had caught her eye now, Melvin saw, and she answered his invitation with a faint smile. Oh, she was a cunning one, all right, looking so fresh and innocent. She could take a slap and come back with a smile. Now the doctor was falling all over himself to be nice to her. He had his arm around her as they walked out of view.

When Melvin's cell door opened a few minutes later he was still standing there, watching at the narrow window.

"Look at him, would you," one of the four attendants said. "Up on his feet again. This is a case for Pibbering."

Pibbering? Were they speaking of the once-famous criminal doctor? A case for Pibbering... Just an expression, Melvin thought.

"We'll soon know," one of the attendants said.

Melvin braced himself for another bad time. But he was pleasantly surprised. They hadn't come to torture him or to inject serums into his blood stream. This time it was something mild by contrast. They set up a recording apparatus in his cell. They began to fire questions at him. Later the physicians would study his answers as synchronized with brain waves, pulse beat and other physiological reactions.

Fifteen minutes of rapid-fire questions gave them the data they wanted.

"I know what the doctors will say,"

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said one of the attendants, gathering up the apparatus. "This guinea pig is right where he was when we started."

"He hasn't budged an inch. He hated the red and yellow when he came in. He still hates it."

"It's a perfect sample of a tough case. If they can break him down, they can break anybody. I wonder how the girl picked him."

"Yeah, and I wonder what Pibbering will do about him."

Pibbering! There it was again. Melvin's brain was spinning. The attendants went out; the door closed. The echoing conversation about "Pibbering formulas" trailed off into silence.

"So I'm a case for Pibbering," Melvin muttered to himself. The name of Dr. Pibbering had been well known by everyone a few years ago. Pibbering was the big medical criminal of two wars. He had hired out to the enemy nations, and all of decent mankind had been outraged by his evil works. Fortunately, he had died—or so everyone thought. Melvin remembered the pictures in the papers.

These scientists must have been his pupils, Melvin thought. Perhaps one had taken his name—or maybe one was his son.

A few minutes later the cell door opened and Melvin looked upon the stoop-shouldered, yellow-eyed man with the scarred and twisted mouth. No one in the world could mistake that face. Pibbering was alive!

"This is the case, Dr. Pibbering," an attendant said.

The look of those yellow eyes was like an electric shock. Melvin recoiled. The graying doctor shuffled into the cell slowly. He gave the impression of being slow and crippled, yet you instantly felt the fast play of his nerves as he took you in. All in a glance he saw the color of your eyes, the paleness of your cheek, the twitch of your fingers, the sharp intake of your breath.

You hardly noticed the younger doctor, Dean Stetcher, standing back of him, holding the blue book. You were only half aware of the young doctor's respectful words.

"This is our prize case, Dr. Pibbering. Our regular treatments haven't dented him. He has the same aversion to the red and yellow that he had when Miss LaRue spotted him in the park. I think she did very well, Doctor, to—"

"Yes." Pibbering's low husky voice cut Dr. Dean short. He took the open book and glanced through the notations. "Very well."

"When shall we expect you again, Doctor?"

"Soon. I shall study this record and your other data this afternoon. Our employer should be pleased to know that we have at last come to grips with this type which is representative of the extreme resistance." The scar-faced doctor allowed his yellow eyes to linger upon Melvin for a moment. There was a mocking smile in the corners of the twisted mouth. "Get some rest, young man. I shall see you first thing in the morning."

DEEP IN the night Melvin awakened. He arose painfully, trying to remember where he was and what had happened. Thin light filtered into his cell. The white bandages that adorned his brown arms and his half-naked body showed bright, almost luminous. He was wearing tight-fitting white trunks. He moved about the cell restlessly. Needless to say, they hadn't left him his clothing or any of his pocket things. He was possessed by a feverish desire to make notes on what had happened. If he ever got out of this madhouse...

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But no, they would never let him out alive. They wouldn't dare. All at once this realization came to him clearly. Whatever they meant to do with him, he could be sure he would never have a chance to reveal what he had seen. To the outside world he would become a missing person. And here—what?

Here he would become another ghost of a man, like John. Another living ghost with a glittering mad eye and needle wounds all over his rag-like body.

He paused at the narrow pencil-shaped windows in his cell door. He could hear the slow footsteps of one of the guards keeping night vigil in the laboratory. Moonlight was showering down from the roof garden into the big oval room, illuminating a patch of wall, one end of a laboratory table with test tubes of many colors, and a wide slice of the glass-smooth floor. The sight fascinated him. He listened, trying to interpret the slightest sounds.

A tiny tap sounded against his door. It might have been the touch of a fingernail. He listened.

Tap. Tap, tap, tap.

He answered the signal with the slight tap of his fingernail. Then came a whisper right at his ear.

"Melvin. Is that you?"

"Yes."

He waited for a long moment. From somewhere in the distance the rhythmic footsteps of a guard could be heard, moving off into another part of the building.

Then the whisper came again: "Melvin, are you ready to go with me? It's Dorothy LaRue. I'm going to open your door. You'll keep quiet, won't you?"

"Yes," he whispered back.

The familiar clink of the door sounded. It glided open noiselessly. Melvin stepped out into the laboratory corridor. In the softness of the moonlight he could see the shining eyes of the girl. Her look was one of questioning.

"I wasn't sure whether you would trust me," she whispered.

"I'm not sure myself."

"We can't talk about it now. Trust me, please, and follow me." The cell door closed with a slight clink.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm going to get you out of here."

"Why?"

"Why? I got you in, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Believe me, I didn't know what I was getting you into." The emotions of remorse were unmistakable, even in her soft voice. "Believe me...." She was leading the way into the oval room.

"I can't figure what a girl like you is doing in this racket in the first place."

"I didn't know. I came here...following someone I loved. I took the job, agreeing to do whatever they asked—"

"Because you were in love with that skunk of a doctor Dean Stetcher."

"No, please. You're jumping at conclusions. It isn't what you think—

"I haven't time to explain now. But tell me this." She stopped suddenly and turned to face him, and for a moment the moonlight from the high arch above the room was full in her face. She couldn't have known what a picture she was, looking up at him, appealing to him. "Tell me—"

"Yes?"

Her fingers tightened on his arms. "Tell me, have you seen anyone here named John?"

"John! Yes, of course."

"Oh!" She almost melted into his arms, and he could see the tears in her eyes. "Oh, then he's here!"

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"You mean you were in love with him?"

"He's my brother. I traced him here. I had warned him not to get mixed up in this. I should have known better."

"You should have known better than to warn him? Why?"

"Because he's so like a child. He always does exactly what you tell him not to do. It was just a quirk in his nature to be contrary. Oh, if I had only left him alone he might never have come. But I saw the secret letter they wrote, promising him fabulous wealth if he'd just allow himself to be used in experiments. I pleaded with him not to do anything foolish. And then, before I knew it, he was gone—I didn't know where. It took me days to trace him to this address."

"And so you got a job here as receptionist?"

"That was my one chance to find my way into their confidence. There was so much secrecy, I knew it was something dangerous. I knew that if I made one false step, my chance would be gone. But now I'm here—"

"Here, yes. And the guards are all around us."

"But the way is open."

"You mean over the roof in all that moonlight? We'll be shot."

"Not the roof, the spiral slide."

"The way I came in?" Melvin glanced about through the shadowy objects of the room, wondering just where he had come in. It was off somewhere across this large central room. He remembered the big spheres of colored liquids that seemed to be spinning around his head when he first landed on the floor.

"If we can find John, we can get out, the three of us," Dorothy whispered confidently. "That spiral goes all the way down."

"To the ground floor?"

"Yes, to an alley. Persons have been brought up here in a drunken stupor from drugs. They've been used here for experiments, and dumped—afterward—still in a stupor."

"They slide all the way down into the alley?"

"Yes. I've heard the attendants talk of it—men have been seen stumbling away without ever knowing what happened to them."

"Of all the damnable rackets!"

"But this I'm sure of, Melvin. Some men don't get away. That's why I couldn't sleep for thinking of you. And what I had done to you, bringing you here. Now do you believe me? You do, don't you?"

He drew her into his arms. She yielded so naturally to his embrace that he drew her face close, and kissed her once.

"I'm thanking you," he breathed.

"You're forgiving me, aren't you," she whispered.

A shadow passed across her moonlit face. Two shadows were moving across the floor, shadows that came from the glass promenade high above them. Dorothy's startled face looked. Melvin saw, too, at that same instant. The silhouettes of two men were moving along up there in the moonlight. One of them, Melvin knew, was Dr. Pibbering.

"Quick!" Dorothy said, catching Melvin's hand. "We've got to find John!"

The awful part of it was that neither one of them knew which way to look. There were other cells down the row from Melvin's. They started in that direction. They found two cells empty. There was no time to look in a third, for the footsteps and low voices could now be heard on the stairway leading down from the roof balcony. On tiptoe they hurried across

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to the oval room where they might hide.

"John probably isn't in a cell anyway," Melvin whispered. "They seem to give him the run of the place, like a doctor."

"I haven't even heard his voice since I've been here."

"You might not know him. He's pale. They've used him badly. You mustn't be shocked."

"If we can just find him and get out, that's all." Her voice was quivering. Melvin thought she was crying.

"Here. Back in these shadows."

They hid themselves in a little alcove where uniforms, laboratory aprons and coats hung from hooks and clothestrees. As the footsteps of Dr. Pibbering and his guest came down into the big room, they waited breathlessly, listening. Melvin felt the girl's trembling hand against his own. He slipped his arm around her quivering body and his hand tightened over her fingers.

The footsteps of a guard approached from another direction. A light snapped on. The guard called across to Dr. Pibbering to make sure everything was all right. Then he snapped the light off and retreated to another part of the building. The low voices of Pibbering and his guest were too far away to be understood.

"They're away from the stairs now," Melvin whispered. "If we had John—"

"No, they might turn on a light. They're moving this way. We'll have to wait."

"Who is with Pibbering?"

"I'm not sure. I thought it might be John. If they come closer—"

"They've turned off."

In silence they waited. The moon shadows were shifting. From the far side of the big room a triangle of jets cast their baleful orange-colored light over the massive pieces of laboratory equipment. Lines of colored light flickered through rows of test tubes. A tongue of blue flame wavered back and forth under a gleaming crucible, its rhythm making long lines of shadow-like giant spider legs creep back and forth across the floor.

"What do you hear?" Dorothy whispered.

At first it was only the sounds of the laboratory that Melvin distinguished. All along he had been aware of the slow incessant drip—drip—drip of liquids gliding down, drop by drop, through a long, diagonal crystal cylinder. Intermittently the rhythm would be disturbed by a low swoosh of liquids overflowing; then a barely audible tinkle of some unseen weighing apparatus; then again the slow drip—drip—drip.

But now Melvin heard more—a rhythmic thump—thump—thump—thump.

Sometimes the beat coincided with that of the dripping noise; again the patterns of rhythm crossed so that he heard each beat separately.

"It's men marching!" the girl whispered. "It's the slaves!"

"Slaves? What slaves? Where?"

"In another room somewhere. I've heard the men talk about them. I'm not supposed to know. They'd kill me if I ever told."

Melvin crept out of his hiding place. Dorothy clung to his hand. They could see a rectangle of yellow light far down the corridor. Silhouetted against the light were the black figures of the two men—Dr. Pibbering and the other. The rectangle of light was the wide opening into a huge room beyond.

Thump—thump—thump. Men were marching in formation in that big empty room. Dr. Pibbering and his guest stood in the doorway like generals reviewing their troops.

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Melvin and Dorothy moved along the shadowy wall toward the light. They took care to step with the rhythm of the march. Thump—thump—thump—thump.

They paused at an alcove, close enough to catch the full benefit of the view.

"They're all in uniform," Dorothy whispered. "There are over a hundred."

"A hundred and twenty-eight—you can tell by the formations. They're going round and round. But where have they been? Where did they come from? How did they get in?"

"They've been there," the girl said. "They were here before I came, though this is the first time I've seen them. They're Pibbering's experiments."

"Were they marched in here from some army?"

"They were lured in, one at a time. They've been doped into blind submission. They're the product that Dr. Pibbering plans to turn out by the thousands. They're slaves!"

"Slaves of what?"

"Slaves of that man you see in the doorway with Dr. Pibbering."

At that moment the men in the doorway turned, and Melvin saw plainly the animal-like features and maniacal eyes of the one and only Kozmack!

Kozmack and the doctor turned abruptly. The doctor pressed a button and the door slid closed. He switched on the amber-colored indirect lights that ran the length of the corridor. Then he and Kozmack moved leisurely down the way toward the big oval room. Now Melvin could hear what the aged doctor was saying.

"You can't complain about results like that, Mr. Kozmack. I'm doing for you what no one else in the world can do."

"And that's why you're being protected," Kozmack said in a tone that was condescending in the extreme. "Protected and richly overpaid."

The doctor ignored the comment. "You saw for yourself how those men were marching. They're machines, I tell you. I started them at twelve midnight. It's now four in the morning. In these four hours they haven't missed a step. I can turn out thousands like that."

"That's what I'm paying you for."

"If I don't stop them they'll march till they drop in their tracks. If I should order them to fight, they'd fight till they die fighting."

"That's what I've ordered. But how long are they good for on the march?"

"I've never let them go till they dropped. If you wish to know—"

"Find out for me. Let these men keep marching till they fall."

"If you say so. It may cost a few lives—"

"Lives are cheap. The point is, we need to know their exact limits of endurance, so that when we convert a million men to the Kozmack Cause, we'll know. From the very hour that we put them in red and yellow uniforms, we'll know...."

Melvin and Dorothy huddled tight in the recessed doorway, and the two men, deep in their conversation, moved past them. The talk of slaves abruptly changed to talk of the inevitable resistance. The government, the police, the newspapers, the influential citizens were all growing openly hostile to the Kozmack movement; yet there was time to gain headway before the public became too much aroused.

"We can take advantage of American freedom up to a point," Kozmack said. "When they begin to suppress us, that's when we go underground. You and your laboratories all

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over the country will have to work, full staff, twenty-four hours a day. And this above all—you'll have to find a serum to frustrate the leaders of the resistance."

"I'm way ahead of you, Mr. Kozmack," the old doctor said crustily.

"You'll have to be able to convert our toughest enemies in a matter of hours. I don't mean the weak ones like these slaves. I mean the brilliant, stubborn, steel-minded citizen who would die rather than see America slip. Convert that kind of man—convert him even for a moment—long enough to confuse the public—and our little revolution is a pushover."

"I repeat," the doctor stopped, placed his fists on his hips. "I'm way ahead of you. I have a specimen under observation right now. He's your solid fighting citizen, and I'll have him converted into a mechanized slave soon after daybreak."

"Is that so?" The big-shouldered Kozmack tossed his head with an air of skepticism. "I think I'll stay around and see this happen."

"That's your privilege." The doctor motioned toward a cell door nearby. "If you want to take a look at the raw material, he's right in here."

"He's not one of my good friends, I assume."

"Hardly. He heard you speaking in the park yesterday. If you'll pardon the expression, he hates your guts. His life's ambition is to ridicule you on every stage and every television screen in America."

"He should be a valuable guinea pig," Kozmack said, "if I don't happen to lose my temper and kill him by mistake."

"Well, don't. He'd be hard to replace. I wouldn't lose him for a cold million." The doctor switched on the cell light, peered in at the narrow window, and scowled. "I don't see him. Careful."

Kozmack drew a pistol. Melvin, watching from the alcove, felt Dorothy's arms tighten nervously.

Dr. Pibering unlocked the cell. The door moved open. The doctor, slow and shuffling and seemingly crippled, was suddenly moving with the quickness of an animal. He entered.

Melvin whispered. "Here comes our chance to make a break. If Kozmack follows him in..."

Kozmack started in. His elbows still showed at the cell doorway.

Melvin could hardly wait to slip forward. If he could lock the two of them in, then there would be a swift moment for finding John and running for safety before the guards could answer the inevitable shouting.

"What are you going to do?" Dorothy whispered.

"Lock them in... maybe. If that damned Kozmack wasn't so cautious—"

"Look!"

Out of the shadows came a naked figure, running noiselessly on bare feet straight toward the cell door. From some hiding place a slave had evidently been watching the whole procedure. He too had foreseen the chance to thrust the two men into the cell and throw the lock. He was racing—

"It's John! He's going to make it!" the girl cried under her breath.

Kozmack suddenly whirled out of the doorway and fired the pistol. The weapon flashed three times. Its thunder reverberated through the cavernous laboratory. John's emaciated body went down in a heap.

The girl sprang out of Melvin's grasp and ran toward him crying, "John, John... Oh John, it's Dorothy, look at me..."

Melvin, rushing after her, thought

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he saw the faded eyes of John look up and recognize her before his head toppled over on his arm.

"He's dead," Dorothy cried in horror, drawing back. "He's been shot—and he isn't even bleeding!"

IT WAS daylight—Melvin knew that before he even opened his eyes. He was not in his cell—he knew that, too, from the sounds of voices around him. He had been doped with the new drug, that he remembered plainly.

"He'll wake up soon. In a few minutes we'll know." Dr. Pibbering's voice oozed confidence.

Melvin kept his eyes closed. So they were all around him waiting for him to wake up, were they? His eyelids tightened.

Time was precious. As long as they didn't know he was awake, his time was his own, time to try to think things through. What were they going to do with him? Make short work of him, most likely, just as they had John.

Poor John! He'd taken a chance and lost. In half a second's time the fates had turned against him.

It was a wonder that the infuriated Kozmack hadn't turned his pistol on the rest of them while he was at it. It was a wonder he hadn't shot Dorothy down in cold blood when she'd rushed up to her brother. But Dr. Pibbering had snarled, "You're blasting your own cause, Kozmack. These are million-dollar specimens. Better put your gun away."

And Kozmack, stinging from the rebuke, had pocketed his pistol. The guards had rushed up with whips, alarms had sounded, and the doors to all stairways had clanged shut.

"This is the one I was telling you about," the old doctor had said, pointing Melvin out to Kozmack. "And this other..." he pointed to the dead form of John... "has been our source of certain hormones. We considered him as harmless and faithful as any slave."

"Apparently he wasn't so harmless," Kozmack said. "Someone had let this man out of his cell."

"I let him out!" Dorothy cried. "I was looking for my brother and I—"

"Pay no attention to her. In her present emotional state she might say anything." This remark had come from the bug-eyed Doctor Dean, who had strolled into the room back of the guards.

For a few minutes they had talked and argued, all of them giving respectful attention to any words from Kozmack.

"What's done is done," Kozmack said. "Get on with your experiment, Pibbering. Make your bluff good, that's all I ask."

And with that they had all turned their attention to Melvin. They brought a needle and gave him a quick knockout. The blackness swept in on him again.

But now, with his eyes still closed, he was wide awake. He was sitting in an easy chair. When the voices around him quieted he could hear the steady drip—d r i p—drip—and occasionally the swooosh and faint clink of a measure of liquids passing automatically through a weighing machine. From another direction came the muffled thump—thump—thump—of the marching slaves. The big rectangular door to their room must be open.

He knew from the talk that sound cameras were ready for his awakening. He knew that Dorothy was there; that the youngish round-shouldered Dr. Dean was sitting near her, talking to her in a low voice, trying to console her over what had happened to her brother, and at the same time

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trying to win her over to the cause of Kozmack.

Melvin felt keenly alert. He felt alive from his toes to his fingertips. He wanted to keep his eyes closed because they wanted him to wake up. Otherwise he was so full of weird impulses he didn't know what he wanted.

Someone slapped him hard across the cheek.

Pibbering's voice said, "Dorothy, you shouldn't have done that."

Melvin's eyes popped open. It was a trick. Dorothy was nowhere near. The doctor himself had delivered the slap. In his crusty old voice he said, "Awake? I thought so. Would you like to get out of this place?"

Melvin, narrowing his eyes against the light, looked about deliberately. Everyone—doctors, attendants, Pibbering, Dean, Kozmack and Dorothy—was watching him. The cameras were busy. Dr. Pibbering drew his chair up close, his yellow eyes drilling Melvin.

"I asked you a question, young man. Would you like to get out of this place?"

"No," Melvin said. His answer was crisp and it gave him a feeling of cockiness, a sense of confidence, a weird feeling of power.

"I suppose you'd like some breakfast served on a silver platter," Pibbering said sarcastically.

"No."

Pibbering changed his tone: "Well, I know what you would like. You'd like a chance to strike that attendant you fought with yesterday. Here he is." Pibbering beckoned to one of the attendants, who stepped forward cautiously. "Here, Melvin Bolt. Would you like to lambast him on the jaw?"

"No."

"Well. Something's happened to you. You don't want to fight any more, do you?"

"I do want to fight," Melvin snapped. "I just don't want to fight him, that's all."

"Well, something has happened to you, all right."

"Nothing has happened. What makes you think anything has happened?"

"Because you don't know whether you're coming or going, that's why," Dr. Pibbering said savagely. Kozmack was muttering unpleasantly to himself, showing signs of impatience.

"I know all right," Melvin said stubbornly. "You don't know whether I'm coming or going, but I know."

At that moment Dorothy rushed over to him, just as she had rushed to her brother at the wrong time, unable to control her emotions. It was as if her grief over John had suddenly turned into love and compassion for Melvin.

"Oh, Melvin, don't try to fight them. You don't know what you're saying," she cried. "They've drugged you until you're out of your head."

"Come away from there," Pibbering said. "You're interrupting."

She might not have heard him. She was sobbing over Melvin now, as if trying to plant some ray of hope in his tortured mind. "Have faith, Melvin. I'll get you out of here yet, somehow—"

"I don't want to get out," Melvin said.

"You've got to get out. You've got to tell the whole world about this dreadful business."

"I tell you I don't want to get out. I like it here."

The girl began to draw back, looking at him strangely. She gave a little shocked cry: "Oh, Melvin, they've harmed you."

"They have not. I feel fine. I never felt better."

"Don't let them make a slave out

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of you, Melvin."

*"But I want to be a slave!"* He rose suddenly. "Well, why doesn't someone get me a uniform? How am I going to march with the other slaves if you don't get me a uniform?"

"Sit down!" Pibbering ordered.

"I won't sit down. *I want to march!"* He turned and strode toward the big open door at the end of the corridor. Along the way he saw exactly what he had demanded—a red and yellow uniform hanging by a cell door. He hurriedly put it on. Then he strode through the open door and fell into the first marching line that came by. "They can't tell me not to!" he said. "I want to be a slave and I'll be a slave!"

AS MELVIN afterward learned, everyone who had hoped Dr. Pibbering's experiments would succeed, considered this a moment of final triumph. Kozmack could hardly refrain from shouting. The doctors and attendants held back breathlessly, to make sure the victory was real. Dorothy was lost in tears, and when the young Dr. Dean tried to comfort her, she recoiled from his touch.

Kozmack should have been completely satisfied, but he wasn't. His wealth was back of this whole laboratory, and he owned every doctor in it. Whatever they might advise, his own word was law. If he wanted to try new experiments, it was up to the doctors to serve his whims. Even Dr. Pibbering.

"But my dear Kozmack," Pibbering protested, "these one hundred and twenty-eight slaves are the finished product. They'll serve you to their last breath, just as they stand."

They were standing at the moment. At Kozmack's request, a halt had been ordered. Standing in the ranks with them, Melvin Bolt could hear the conversation that ensued between the old doctor and the political firebrand.

"Are you telling me what I want and what I don't want?" Kozmack snarled, squaring his great shoulders.

"You know I'll carry out your orders, Kozmack. I was simply advising—"

"But for me you wouldn't be alive," Kozmack said. "I'm protecting you and paying you—"

"I'm at your service, of course. I was merely advising—"

"That one hundred and twenty-eight slaves are perfect as they stand. I don't deny it," Kozmack said. "They stand well. But they're only a handful. You can make a million more like these. These hundred and twenty-eight are expendable in the interests of science. If we don't try we'll never know but what we could make them over in the pattern of that last one—that hundred and twenty-ninth—Melvin Bolt. Can't you make them all like him?"

"They were different to start with," Pibbering tried to explain. "They responded to milder treatments."

"But you see that he has more fire than the others. He would fight, but not like a machine. He would have cunning and wit. He's sharper. One look tells you he's far more dangerous. If I had an army of men like him, every command from me would rip the enemy to shreds. Can't you make the others like him?"

"I doubt it," Dr. Pibbering said.

"You're stalling. Do you have enough of the serum made up?"

"Possibly."

"And you can get more where that came from?"

"No. It came from John. I had invested a lot in John. He's dead now, unfortunately."

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"Unfortunately, you say? I don't like the implication of that remark, Pibbering. And I don't believe that that one dishrag of a man could be your only source of this new medicine. You're trying to get around me, Pibbering. I hereby order you to inject these one hundred and twenty-eight men with the new medicine."

Melvin saw the old doctor weave as if he had been struck. "All of them?" His scarred, twisted mouth quivered strangely.

"All of them." Kozmack slapped his pistol pocket with a savage air. "At once."

All the doctors and attendants went to work a few minutes later. The big open room became a strange sight, as the uniformed men sat, dazed and sleepy. Melvin watched with wonderment an hour later as they began to come to their feet. He wondered if they were going through the same weird feelings he had experienced. For his own part, the false exhilaration was beginning to wear off. He looked about, wondering what had happened to Dorothy. He began to be filled with a strange remorse for the sharp answers he had given her. How deeply hurt she must have been.

She was watching, too. She was doing her best to ignore the attentions of Dr. Dean. What irony, Melvin thought, that she should let herself show her hatred for Dean, when he was probably the only one now who could save her from the trouble she'd walked into.

"I'll not last long," Melvin said to himself. "The way things are going I'll follow in John's footsteps within a few days, if not hours.... And these other slaves—they'll get themselves shot up, most likely, if the serum hits them the way it did me. But after the smoke has cleared, there'll still be the young bug-eyed doctor and Dorothy. And if she doesn't play her hand right, he'll think back to last night—"

His thoughts broke off sharply as he watched the trail of uniformed slaves rising and roving across the room. He looked about, wondering what had happened to Dr. Pibbering. The other doctors and attendants were on hand. Pibbering was nowhere in sight.

"What happened to the doctor?" Kozmack was saying, prancing about. "Those slaves are coming to life."

"He must have gone to his office," Dr. Dean said.

"Find him," Kozmack ordered. "He should be here."

Dean passed the order on to others. In a moment the agitated Kozmack had sent most of the staff off, one way or another, to find Dr. Pibbering and get him back here at once.

Melvin looked at his uniform. He sensed the restlessness of the other uniformed slaves. They were moving toward the door in a body. They were unarmed, but they had the look of wildly defiant men.

Kozmack marched up to meet them.

"Halt!"

They showed no signs of having heard the order.

"Halt! Halt, I say! HALT!!!"

More than a hundred men marched forward in a defiant wall.

"Halt—or I'll shoot you down! Come a step closer and you'll die!"

Three times his gun went off. The three foremost slaves stumbled and fell to the floor. The others came on. They trod over their dead comrades and marched ahead. They marched in no order—just a wall of mad humanity defying the order to halt.

Three more times he shot. Three more fell. Others fell too as the guards opened up with firearms. But the mass

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of men came on. Kozmack, backing away from them, stumbled into a laboratory table. The men crowded into him. Melvin saw his arms flailing wildly; he saw the table go over, and the broad-shouldered Kozmack with it. A flash of fire from the test tubes flared upward. The table crashed. The flickering blue blaze under a gleaming crucible fanned out in long fingers of red and yellow.

Glass crashed. The men still marched as the dry of halt rang out against the din.

Through the puffs of white smoke and blinding fire, Melvin found Dorothy. Her hand was reaching toward his. She tried to shake her other hand free. Dean Stetcher was clinging to her for dear life.

Melvin never remembered striking the young doctor, only Dean's falling backward, his fish-like eyes half closed.

Then Melvin was following Dorothy to the trap door. They slipped into the aperture and went spiralling down.

Melvin never knew when the girl fainted; he only knew that he clung to her tightly, that her head was tight against his chest, that they were spinning down and down endlessly. Then suddenly they were out in the open air, in an alley filled with shouting people. Firewagons were on the way, and everyone was pointing to the mountains of smoke that exploded up from the top of the building.

Someone helped them to their feet, saying conversationally, "At least you folks come through with your faces on straight. The other guy that came out this chute had his mouth on crooked. Didn't wait to answer any questions, either. Just grabbed a taxi and beat it."

Melvin and Dorothy made no such quick getaway. They stayed to answer a thousand questions, and the more they told the more the police and reporters were mystified.

When, at last, in the quiet of Dorothy's home, Melvin had a chance to talk with her alone, there were still plenty of questions to be answered.

"What I don't understand is why I should have wanted to be a slave, even if I was doped. But I really didn't—I just said it to be contrary."

"And that, Melvin, is the answer."

"You mean—"

"The hormones they developed from John's blood didn't give them a drug that would make you servile, as they supposed. It was a drug that made you say no to everything anyone suggested. That was John's most obvious characteristic. I told you—if I advised him one way, he would do the opposite."

Melvin smiled faintly as his thoughts went back. They had asked him if he wanted to leave the laboratory. No, he had wanted to stay.

"And I, like a dope, tried to persuade you never to become a slave, so you marched in for your uniform."

"Do you know, Dr. Pibbering must have suspected. That's why he skidded out. I wonder if he'll get away."

"Wherever he is, he'll read in the papers that the more Kozmack shouted *halt*, the more the slaves *marched*. Then he'll know for sure. By the way, Melvin," Dorothy said wistfully, "are you still that way?"

"What way?" Melvin gave her a look, feigning to be on his guard.

"The way you were—ready to do just the opposite of what anyone suggests."

"What were you going to suggest?"

She smiled. "That you mustn't ever, ever think of making love to me."

"As long as the Kozmack Cause is dead," he said with a twinkle, "I'm not afraid of becoming a slave."

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# READER'S PAGE

## REPORT FROM THREE BRIDGES.

Dear LES:

Firstly, anyone with a copy of this month's FA (July) that has E. K. Jarvis' name by the picture on the second cover please contact me. I have a copy with Lee Francis' name on it, and I want the other.

Your editorial offered some bright spots. Like: The cover proofs might have been a mystery to Phillip Marlowe but not to Paul Pine, for I have great faith in John Evans. (who is really our own Howard Browne). And this: So Paul W. Fairman has been added to your staff of editors, huh? This is good; here is the same guy editing a competitor; here is the same guy writing *good* stf and fantasy. And now he takes another editorial job yet. Man! Also this: FANTASTIC has been selling beyond expectations. Maybe you think so, but I knew it all along. In the May and June issues of AS and FA you had advertisements saying that if one rushed down to his newsstand he could still get his copy of F. Who's kiddin' who? Most of the places I passed by were sold out in a day, or three. I thank my lucky stars that I live out in God's country, where there aren't so many stf/fantasy readers. And then you add this: That's as it should be! Tut!! That's for us, the readers, to say; not you, the editors. It sounds like bragging coming from you. But, come to think of it, I'd be bragging too.

All the stories were good; Sam Merwin, Jr.'s "One Guitar" my personal favorite. This Ralph Sholto is new, huh? He has a story in IF, too.

The cover was fair; so were the illos. The best was Stone's for "And the Monsters Walk", by John W. Jakes. But what's happened to Krupa and Sharp, etc.?

The departments and features were good. The Reader's Page should be longer. (How can I get a letter published otherwise?) Some comments to:

Fred Chappell—You're so right. FA uses too much stf. But AS is coming along nicely. While Sturgeon's "The Dreaming Jewels" was so well liked, it didn't sell well at all. "The Traveling Crag" was one of my favorites for '51. Yes, more Cartier. I hear that Bok has deserted stf and fantasy.

Name Withheld—Nice to see you again. You were right about Marlowe being a pen name for Lesser. But Phillips isn't Costello. Costello was in the writing game long before Rog popped out of the top hat. I'm afraid that I do agree with your definition of space opera. Because he makes a machine and then later breaks it up, well...St. Reynard's best was his two Usurper tales. (Oh, to see them between hard-covers! Why is it that the good stuff is never picked up as fast as stuff that is not as good? It's Fantastic.) Captain Video is too still space opera but a better grade. I think Milt Lesser will be surprised to learn he writes it. The writer is George Lothar, who did the Tom Mix radio show. Now he does most of the TV scripts. "Beyond the Rings of Saturn" was written by Robert Moore Williams.

My letter in the May issue didn't bring in many results. I would still like Volume I, in good condition. Also, the two other Jongor stories.

Hey, LES. We won't have that Chandler opus in July—or August, for that matter, will we?

Let me see, this'll be Rog's first lead in FA since his terrific "The Involuntary Immortals" back in the December 1949 issue. It's sure to be good.

Here's something: Have you books for sale? Do you want to buy books? I'm trying to get up a sort of middle-man deal. Guys send me lists of stuff they want to sell or buy, and I get the best prices possible. Price will depend on book and its condition. If interested, drop me a card for details.

That's all for now, LES. I hope you print this because I do want that other FA I mentioned earlier. Until next month, I remain

Henry Moskowitz
Three Bridges
New Jersey

*Milt Lesser did do some Captain Video before he went into the army. Confidentially, we hired Fairman because he has some very beautiful children and he needed a desk upon which to put their pictures.*
*—Ed.*

## LETTER OF THE MONTH

Dear LES:

Have just polished off the June '52 issue of FA, and must compliment you on continuing a chain of unbreakably good stories which you have set up in recent issues. Nevertheless, I have complimented you greatly in the past; I now feel that it is time to express my major gripe, even if it may mar your happiness at receiving this worthless epistle. As you have probably already guessed, LES, my "gripe" is your present format, which you have maintained since late 1950, with slight reservations. Not only the cover, mind you, but the whole general layout, which is altogether



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too flimsy and sloppy for a magazine such as yours. Oh, I know, you may say that you operate on a limited budget, and can't go radically changing your format all the time, on the wish of a few fans. But I think that what was good for you three or four years ago certainly should be good now. Yes, you heard right. Unlike many readers, I do not wish you to go slick, digest-size and change your name to the Thursday Evening Digest. No, I wish you to put some meat on your mags, get better and more substantial covers, etc. Take, for an example, an issue you published five years ago, June '48. With that cover, format, and number of pages (178 as compared to your 130) and the type of excellent fantasy you publish today, you'd have a magazine that would be a leader in the science-fiction field, instead of what many fans consider an "inferior pulp". 'Nuff said. Just take a look at your files, LES, gaze at some of those Robert Gibson Jones covers, and maybe you'll see what I mean. Anyway, you print some wonderful fiction, and even if you continue with such abominable illustrations as the recent cover, I will still be a faithful reader. Wipe those tears away, LES, we still love you! Now for the present crop of stories, an exceptionally good one:

"Ask a Foolish Question" by Milt Lesser was without doubt the best in the whole issue. Definitely worthy of anthologizing. Hey! Ditto that illo, except for the part about reprinting. You must get more by Tom Beecham. Excellent shadings.

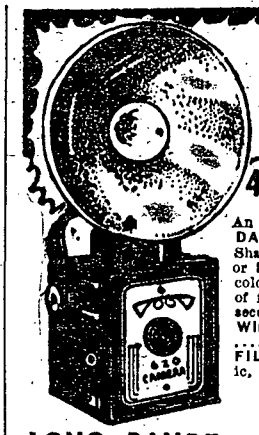
Coming in a close second was Steve Marlowe's "The Lion's Mouth". A rather used theme, but good.

"The Man Nobody Knew" and "Mortality Unlimited" were both good—slightly stereotyped, however.

Paul Fairman's "The Woman in Skin 13" has me stumped for a rating. It was good, but rather vague and detached. Nice writing, but not what you would expect from a writer like Fairman. Try to get him to do some humorous fantasy. But, Gadzooks, woman, what in heaven's name possessed you to print that illustration with it? Does Stone have something against clothes?

Progressing to the Reader's Page, I notice a letter by David Jewett, requesting you to get rid of your filler articles. What's one man's meat is another man's poison, Dave, but I do admit that some of those shorts do get pretty senseless. Hmmmm. See you printed my letter. Good. You are a kind person to take sympathy on this old doddering brain that has nothing better to do than write letters of criticism to editors who slash 'em up with red pencils, anyway. Oh, well. Sometimes I wonder if you even read them all, LES. Can't blame you if you don't.

Recently I spent a long afternoon at a rather lengthy sf convention in New York. The main reason I attended was that you and Howard Browne were listed as to be there. And you didn't show up! Tsk, tsk.

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I am disillusioned. Seriously, though, a lot of you pros take advantage of us commoners' worship of you. You say you're going to attend such-and-such a convention, they send out fancy mimeographed leaflets announcing it, you take a long ride over to New York, and then you're not there. Take this recent convention I was speaking about. I toted over a whole load of books by Isaac Asimov, and no one even knew what had happened to him. Honestly. Not in reference to you, LES, but a lot of you pros who find it good publicity to attend a convention, then spend all your time in the bar better watch out. The time of reckoning has come! We're your bread and butter, and are getting wise to your little tricks.

Despite my criticism, LES, you're still putting out one of the best pulps in the field, and I hope to see many more issues under your able editorship.

Robert D. McNamara
50 Plaza Street
Brooklyn 17, New York

*Thanks for the long, thoughtful letter, Bob. Careful, unbiased opinions of a mag are of great value to any editor. —Ed.*

WE LIKE YOU TOO.

Dear Sir:

No doubt you will be a little surprised to receive a letter from the other side of the Atlantic, but, you see, I have always had a weakness for reading science-fiction stories and have come across many of your FANTASTIC ADVENTURES which, to my mind, is the best of that particular form of literature on the market.

The stories are interesting; not all of them are good, but the percentage is high enough to give you a magazine of which you can be justly proud. To me, the stories have the added interest of occasionally portraying the American way of life; thus your pages offer entertainment and education—a rare combination.

Your presentation is good: I especially like your system of giving the number of words in each story in the list of contents. This makes it possible for a story to be selected whose reading time is the same as the time one has available. No one likes leaving a story half read.

I like the "Reader's Page"—it is a good idea to give the people who read your magazine a chance to "answer back", as it were—the opinions expressed are the yardstick by which you measure the success of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES.

I am hoping this letter will find its way into the Reader's Page, as I would be very pleased to correspond with any of your readers.

Wishing your magazine as much success in the future as it has enjoyed in the past,

Douglas S. Howe
56 Finsbury Street
Buckland, Portsmouth
Hampshire, England

# Miners In The Sky

By

Charles Recour

THEY'RE THINNING out, the miners are, because the Atomic Piles are beginning to produce the rarest elements in quantity, and the prices are going down. Not even Asteroid miners can compete with atomics, but they're by no means a dead breed yet and you can still see them outfitting in a half dozen Martian settlements. They can still drag a living from salvaging chunks of the Rare Earths or occasionally a big strike of Uranium or Polonium, but for the most part that's rare. Still the miners exist.

Look at that big fellow there, standing quietly and contempatively. He looks as tough as they come and yet there's something to his serene manner that says he isn't just a run-of-the-mill miner. Notice the quiet, positive air about him? You wouldn't think he was blind, would you? But he is. He's in a world of perpetual darkness, but there's not the slightest trace of bitterness about him. In a minute you'll see why. Ah, there she is!

That's the reason why MacLaurin looks so happy. See, the way she takes his arm, how tenderly she touches him? Notice the look on *her* face? See the way she smiles. They're more than just a husband and wife, though; they're welded into an inseparable *one*. He can't get along without her—and he wouldn't if he could—and she wouldn't think of leaving him. It's love all right, it's love which started in hate—and that happens often enough too! You see, MacLaurin is blind because of that girl, his wife. She did it—she blinded him!

Oh they're settled down now; occasionally they rake a 'roid run just because people who have been in space once always want to go to get the feeling of it once again. All MacLaurin can sense is free-fall, but that's enough.

It happened four years ago, when MacLaurin was one of the hundreds of hard-bitten men—and a few women—who knocked around the 'roids in little ships hardly bigger than life-boats, testing and checking and latching onto pieces of pay-

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dirt, forty kilos of platinum here, a metric ton of iridium there, and occasionally a few kilos of Uranium or Polonium....

MacClaurin hunched his six-foot bulk closer into the seat before the packed panel of the 'boat. His work was tedious and hard and yet he loved it. There was always the thrill of a possible lucky catch waiting—and then there were hundreds of disappointments compensating in boredom for it. Still he wouldn't have given it up for the world.

He'd put the 'boat into free, a constant velocity, occasionally using a dyne here or a dyne there to correct his course; when his miner's sixth sense told him, he'd bring the little craft to a likely chunk of rock, set her down, lock her with a jet while he went out in spacesuit and put an anchor hole down. Once the boat was secured, he could take samples, bring them back into the craft and give them a quick chemical or spectroscopic check. If he had pay-dirt, he'd know it. It was grubby, dirty, dangerous, nasty work. Like all miners, he wouldn't trade it for any other.

He spotted a particular 'roid, brought the 'boat in, and anchored it. A quick sampling and the suited figure was back in the ship.

It didn't take him more than a few minutes to realize that he'd made a lucky find; this was it. He was sitting on at least two thousand cubic meters of very pure iridium, enough noble metal to settle him for the rest of his life if he were so inclined.

Back out the lock again, this time with a legal marker. He used his blaster to put down a meter hole. Then he jammed the shaft of the legal marker into it, welded it down with a touch of the blaster, and grinned. The red and white ball at the end of the shaft held his legal credentials. This 'roid was his. He'd staked his claim. Now he had to check the surrounding 'roids to make sure he wasn't in the middle of a pack. If he was he'd be damned sure to get down more of them!

He left the 'roid, took his coordinates with optical shots, star-shots, and went about the business of checking the near-by "property". Two hours' work proved it all dud stuff and a waste of time and energy. He headed for his find, figuring to take big samples and then come back with large-scale equipment to cut it up. It was a common-enough procedure.

The 'roid was long and flat like a piece of shale and he approached it from his marker side. Gleefully he put down, suited himself and went through the airlock. There was his marker standing vertically, a ball-topped rod that showed his squatter's rights.

He glanced at it casually—and then looked closer. Somebody had nicely tagged it with a paper note and a piece of wire. Angrily he ripped the paper away and read it.


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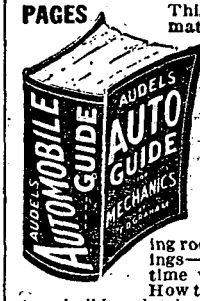


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"You have inadvertently, I hope (it said) jumped a prior acquisition. Please remove your marker and get. Signed A. Branding."

That was all.

MacLaurin cursed fluently and in detail. This was the oldest gag in the game. Somebody had spotted this chunk right after him and decided to do a little jumping of his own. MacLaurin laughed. Like hell he was going to get. A Patrol court would settle this if necessary. But he was a 'roid miner, and 'roid miners frequently settle things away from courts.

He turned to get sampling equipment from the lock after crumpling the paper and shoving it in his pocket.

"I wouldn't if I were you," his headphones said clearly and tinnily. "Let's talk before you go anywhere."

MacLaurin whirled at the sound of the voice and found himself facing a suited figure, sun-mask down, calmly pointing an ordinary automatic pistol at him.

"I've had this claim since—" MacLaurin rattled off coordinates and time like a spitting blaster.

"You're just twenty minutes too late," the other answered. "If you'd taken the trouble to check the other side of this chunk of rock you'd have seen my marker—with time and coordinates." The figure gestured with the pistol. "I guess that's all. You can go now or wait. I've pulsed through to control. A patrol ship is coming out for confirmation. That way we won't have any trouble."

MacLaurin didn't lose his head easily. Subconsciously he knew the stranger could have been right. But the thing seemed so coincidental that there was an element of the unreal about it. A sudden incoherent, consuming rage swept him. The figure was only ten feet away. He swept up the flame-cutter, the blaster at his side in one swooping motion.

The instant he moved, he saw he'd made a mistake. And that was the last thing MacLaurin ever saw. The world seemed to vanish in pain and he knew the stranger'd fired....

MacLaurin came to consciousness in a haze of fire and pain. His chest felt as if he'd been kicked by a mule and he knew at once that that shot had vented his suit. Somebody'd moved fast to get him into a lock. He tried to open his eyes to see, but then he fainted.

When he came to again he heard a woman's voice and thought he was at a base. "I'm sorry," the voice said in far-away tones, "I'm Alice Branding—and I shot you."

That's all there was to it. She nursed him back to health, of course, even after she actually did pulse the patrol and they came in and picked them up. MacLaurin didn't prefer charges even when he learned that he was blinded.... When he knew he couldn't see again, his hatred was almost

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a physical thing, but the woman never left him and time healed even that wound.

You see, the 'roid miners are tough. No tragedy could have affected MacLaurin more deeply, but as you see him standing there with that woman, looking so serene and peaceful, you wouldn't think that their bonds could have been forged on a hate-charged asteroid and welded by the stupid acts only humans can perform....

# THE CHANGELING

## BY

## MORT DALY

EVER SINCE the Walk, I've been different. It was the Walk. I know it. I see differently and I sense things oddly. There is a heightened awareness that I feel in every waking moment. Colors are not the same, things feel peculiar to my tactile sense, and I hear all sorts of things. But these are minor changes. What really matters is what goes through my mind—*and other minds!*

I lecture in the make-shift classroom, but only part of my attention is devoted to what I'm saying. It's as if I had two minds, one of which was occupied with the immediate present and the other of which—well, it reaches and probes and touches. I catch their thoughts; I know what goes through their minds. I don't even have to look—I will the effort and, like a tentacle, a line seems to link our minds. And yet they are unaware of it. —some are unpleasant—horrible. Extra-sensory perception is not to be taken lightly. I wonder what I shall do with it? I've told no one yet—in fact few people know that I even took the Walk. And why tell them? Why tell them about this gift of mine? It would only make them uncomfortable to know I was probing into their minds. And really I can't control it as I would wish. It seems outside me and often I make a great effort of will to wrench my consciousness back to concrete reality. I feel at times like a predatory animal, looking into minds this way. It is not healthy, normal or ethical. I think I shall have to talk this over with someone. I dare not even tell Louise, though. She wouldn't understand. Why am I complaining about this magnificent faculty instead of enjoying the advantages it can give me? Why do I feel so wretched about it...?

*...and Professor Hale was found dead, definitely a suicide. It was known that he had been behaving peculiarly, and a good friend revealed that he had taken the forbidden Walk through the radioactive ruins of Chicago...*

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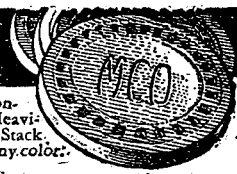

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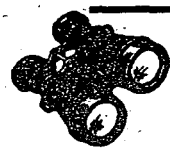

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## JOHN FLETCHER

*(Continued from second cover)*

stories, and a number of opening chapters of—fortunately—abortive novels. More wisely, I devoured Norse and Greek and Roman and Celtic mythology, the Grail legends, the poetry of Tennyson—tales from far-away, told in the language of long-ago, of heroes with exotic names and destinies. That background was to come in mighty handy.

When I was a sophomore in college, majoring in the Humanities, two more events occurred which were to have a lasting influence on me. First, my locker-mate turned out to be a pre-Med major who devoted what little reading time he could spare from Anatomy 3 to—of course—science fiction! He converted me with ease to what I came to regard as a new literature of romance. Next, I found a part-time job in the editorial office of a science-fiction magazine! Between odd, and usually inky, jobs I soaked up a lot of the sf background I'd missed in talks with patient authors and editors. I was sold—but could I sell?

A number of years and a number of jobs later I did—three stories in which I tried to infuse the world of the future with some of the misty quality to be found in ancient legend.

I'm not writing full-time—yet. During the day I read copy in a publishing house; correcting the sometimes muddled syntax of authors who, understandably, will duel at the drop of a comma, and learning how much easier it is to correct a sentence than to compose one. When I can do both with equal facility, I shall leave the parsing part to someone else. And Zeus help him if he touches a colon in one of my stories!

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